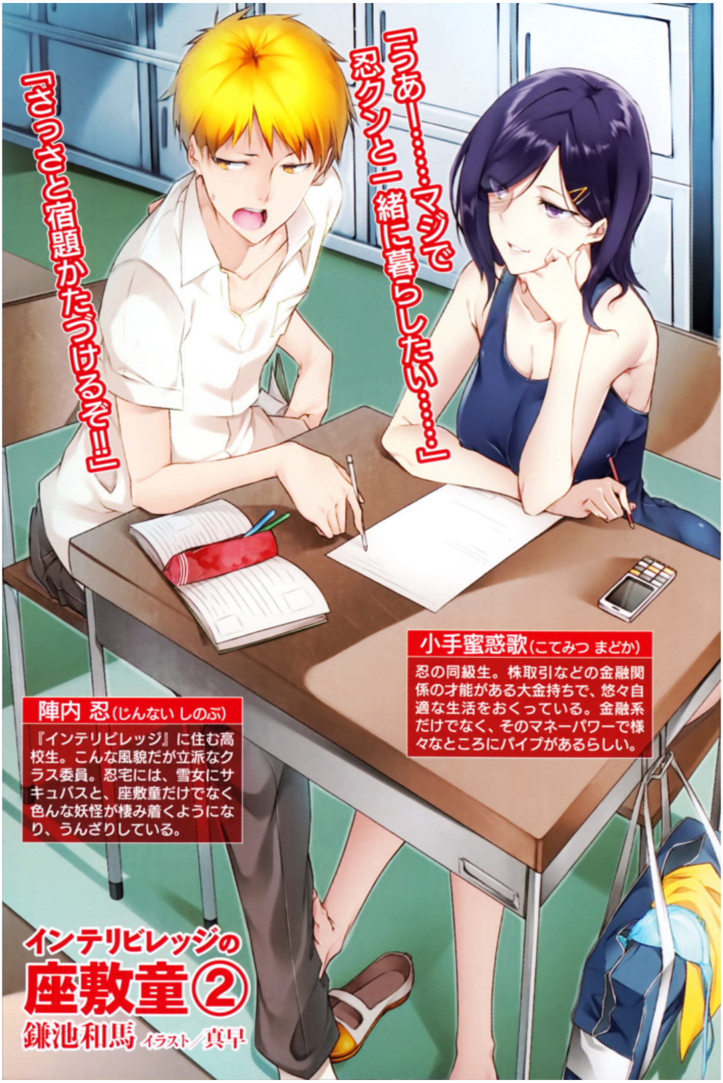
インテリビレッジの座敷童（ざしきわらし）

2

鎌池和馬

イラスト／真早

電撃文庫


「うあー……マジで忍クンと一緒に暮らしたい……」
「さっさと宿題かたづけるぞ!!」

小手蜜惑歌（こてみつ まどか）

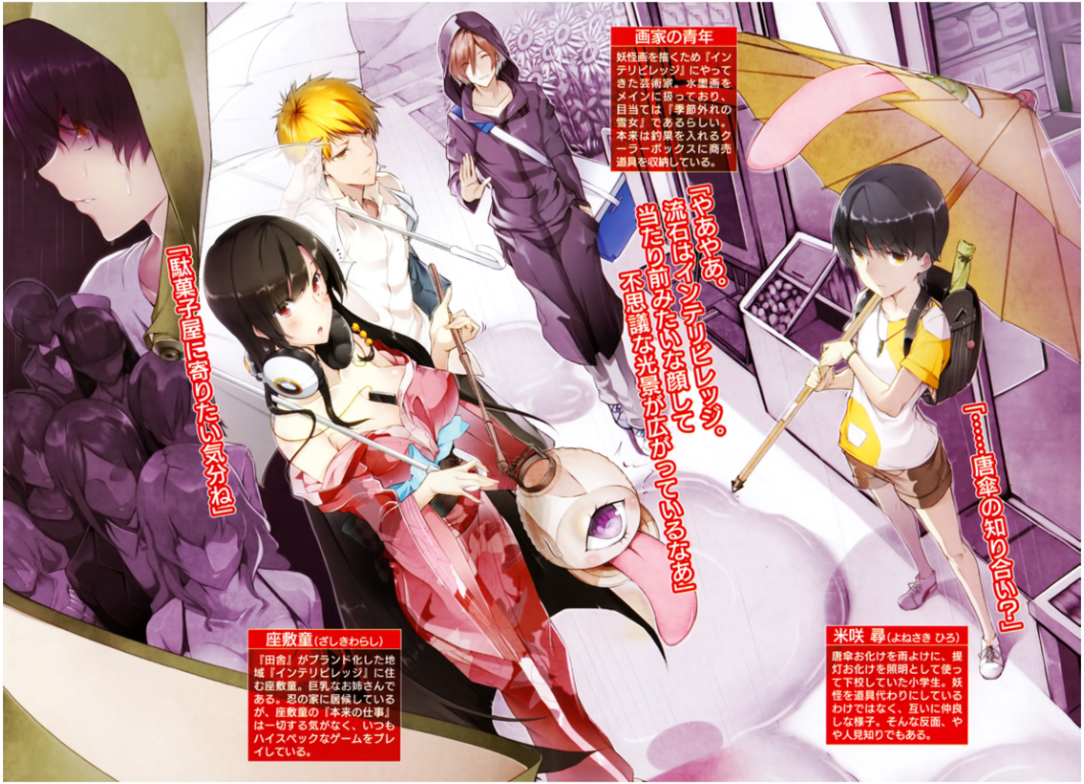
忍の同級生。株取引などの金融関係の才能がある大金持ちで、悠々自適な生活をおくっている。金融系だけでなく、そのマネーパワーで様々なところにパイプがあるらしい。

陣内 忍（じんない しのぶ）

『インテリビレッジ』に住む高校生。こんな風貌だが立派なクラス委員。忍宅には、雪女にサキュバスと、座敷童だけでなく色んな妖怪が棲み着くようになり、うんざりしている。

インテリビレッジの座敷童②

鎌池和馬　イラスト／真早



「……唐傘の知り合い？」
「やあやあ。流石はインテリビレッジ。当たり前みたいな顔して不思議な光景が広がっているなあ」
「駄菓子屋に寄りたい気分ね」

画家の青年

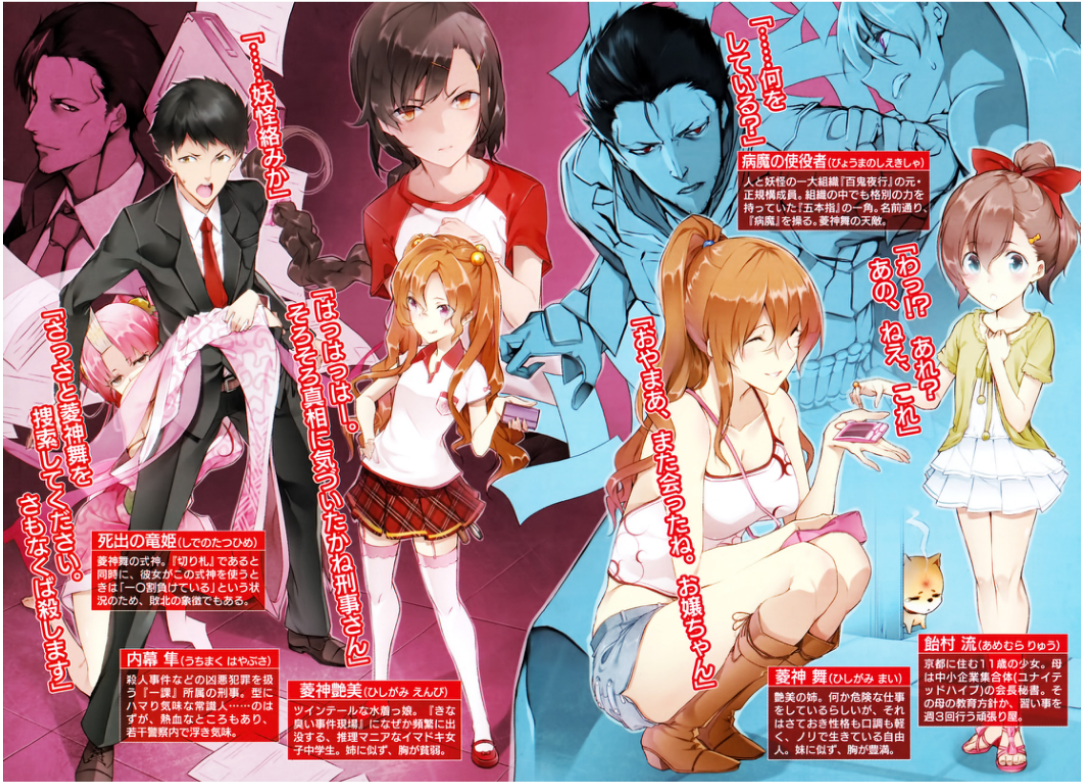
妖怪画を描くため『インテリビレッジ』にやってきた芸術家。水墨画をメインに扱っており、目当ては『季節外れの雪女』であるらしい。本来は釣果を入れるクーラーボックスに商売道具を収納している。

米咲 尋（よねさき ひろ）

唐傘お化けを雨よけに、提灯お化けを照明として使って下校していた小学生。妖怪を道具代わりにしているわけではなく、互いに仲良しな様子。そんな反面、やや人見知りでもある。

座敷童（ざしきわらし）

『田舎』がブランド化した地域『インテリビレッジ』に住む座敷童。巨乳なお姉さんである。忍の家に居候しているが、座敷童の『本来の仕事』は一切する気がなく、いつもハイスペックなゲームをプレイしている。


「……何をしている？」
「わっ!? あれ？ あの、ねえ、これ」
「おやまあ、また会ったね。お嬢ちゃん」
「……妖怪絡みか」
「はっはっは！ そろそろ真相に気づいたかね刑事さん」
「さっさと菱神舞を捜索してください。さもなくば殺します」

病魔の使役者（びょうまのしえきしゃ）
人と妖怪の一大組織『百鬼夜行』の元・正規構成員。組織の中でも格別の力を持っていた『五本指』の一角。名前通り、『病魔』を操る。菱神舞の天敵。

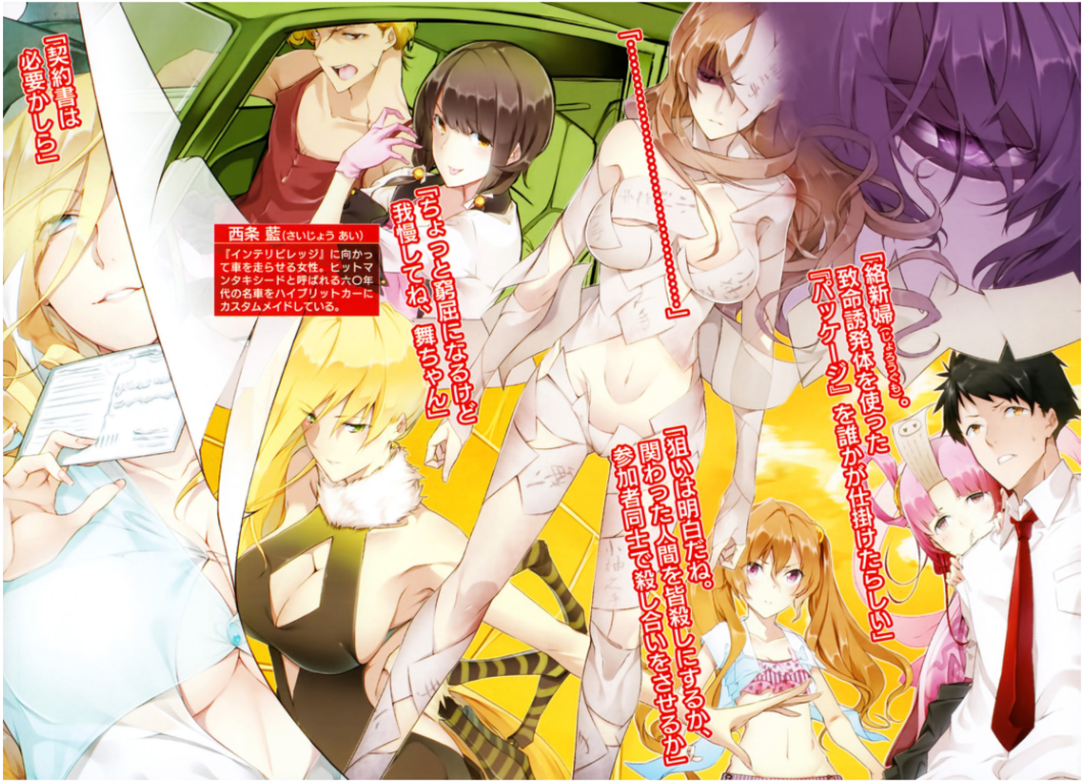
飴村 流（あめむら りゅう）
京都に住む11歳の少女。母は中小企業集合体(ユナイテッドハイブ)の会長秘書。その母の教育方針か、習い事を週3回行う頑張り屋。

菱神 舞（ひしがみ まい）
艶美の姉。何か危険な仕事をしているらしいが、それはさておき性格も口調も軽く、ノリで生きている自由人。妹に似ず、胸が豊満。

菱神艶美（ひしがみ えんび）
ツインテールな水着っ娘。『きな臭い事件現場』になぜか頻繁に出没する、推理マニアなイマドキ女子中学生。姉に似ず、胸が貧弱。

内幕 隼（うちまく はやぶさ）
殺人事件などの凶悪犯罪を扱う『一課』所属の刑事。型にハマり気味な常識人……のはずが、熱血なところもあり、若干警察内で浮き気味。

死出の竜姫（しでのたつひめ）
菱神舞の式神。『切り札』であると同時に、彼女がこの式神を使うときは「一〇割負けている」という状況のため、敗北の象徴でもある。


「絡新婦（じょろうぐも）。致命誘発体を使った『パッケージ』を誰かが仕掛けたらしい」
「狙いは明白だね。関わった人間を皆殺しにするか、参加者同士で殺し合いをさせるか」
「…………………………」
「ちょっと窮屈になるけど我慢してね、舞ちゃん」
「契約書は必要かしら」

西条 藍（さいじょう あい）

『インテリビレッジ』に向かって車を走らせる女性。ヒットマンタキシードと呼ばれる六〇年代の名車をハイブリットカーにカスタムメイドしている。

もくじ

第一章　陣内忍＠歯車の違う時計――010
第二章　菱神舞＠転写される悪意――114
第三章　内幕隼＠シブヤの少女Ａ――190
第四章　？？？＠神を塗り潰す者――344

デザイン／渡邊宏一（有限会社ニイナナニイゴオ）

インテリビレッジの
座敷童②

鎌池和馬

イラスト／真早

Chapter 1: Jinnai Shinobu @ Clock With a Different Gear

Part 1

Even though it was midsummer, the early morning air was cool. When you lived in an old Japanese-style house, the outside temperature had a large effect on the inside temperature. I lived in a giant thatch roof house that's only advantages were its size and age. In one room of that house, I held the replacement for the smartphone that had been destroyed in the previous incident.

It had just arrived from the service center in an early morning delivery.

I lived in an Intellectual Village that created an extremely high class brand name out of the rural area so that grapes were 30,000 yen a bunch and the water flowing through a nearby river was 300 yen a liter. But to obtain the proper feeling of the rural, the area had few stores. For that reason, quite a few different services were handled via online shopping. The delivery companies tried to distinguish themselves by adding on various additional services such as having their trucks function as supermarket-like food carts in case people felt like making an additional purchase when their package was delivered.

At any rate…

It seemed my smartphone had not been repairable, so they had taken the data out of it, added it to a new phone, and sent me that. It was a different model, so the smartphone's body seemed a bit thinner than the old one.

But getting a newer version wasn't a bad thing.

My index finger operated all the basic apps to make sure it was working properly. As I did so, I used the digital camera to take a picture of my own face.

Just as it made an unnecessary shutter sound effect, I heard a whisper from the Zashiki Warashi (long black hair, red yukata, and an incredibly glamorous body) who had entered my room at some point.

"Catching a glimpse of your household's narcissism is more disheartening than I thought it would be."

“Don’t be silly. It’s just that the camera’s settings seem off.”

I really was being super kind to so thoroughly explain what was going on to that glamorous Zashiki Warashi that never gave any fortune to her household and instead lazed around talking about pointless crap.

“Look, there’s something wrong with how it gathers the light. It took the gleaming of my blond hair as the standard and now my skin color is way off.”

“Maybe you’re a special exception, Shinobu.”

“Maybe. Okay, Zashiki Warashi, give me an awkward smile.”

I casually pointed the smartphone at the indoor Youkai and pressed the shutter button on the screen using my index finger.

“See? It took the red of your yukata as the standard. Your skin looks really rough.”

“…”

“Maybe I can manually adjust the values in my profile. …What’s this? By setting the camera to video mode for about 5 seconds in each photographing environment, the focus regulator will automatically detect the ideal values? But I already did-…ow! What is it, Zashiki Warashi? Why are you kicking me in the shin? …Ow, that hurts!”

I ignored the Zashiki Warashi who had fallen silent for some reason and left my room.

Hmm… Maybe that room was a bad environment.

With that thought, I walked down the long passageway and took random pictures in the living room and on the porch, but I didn’t see any difference. It kept taking the places with the brightest light or color as the standard which caused the rest of the photo to look terrible.

“Hmm…”

I aimed the lens away from the 20 meter long porch and to the large yard lying beyond it.

I had a feeling the large yard would be a more difficult environment to handle than indoors, but whatever.

The yard was large enough to actually play tennis in, but it had a lot of harsh ups and downs, mossy garden stones and stone lanterns, and trees too thick for me to completely reach around. There wasn't much usable space left over. The old neighborhood gardener would groan every time he saw the place, but I had no idea what value there was in it.

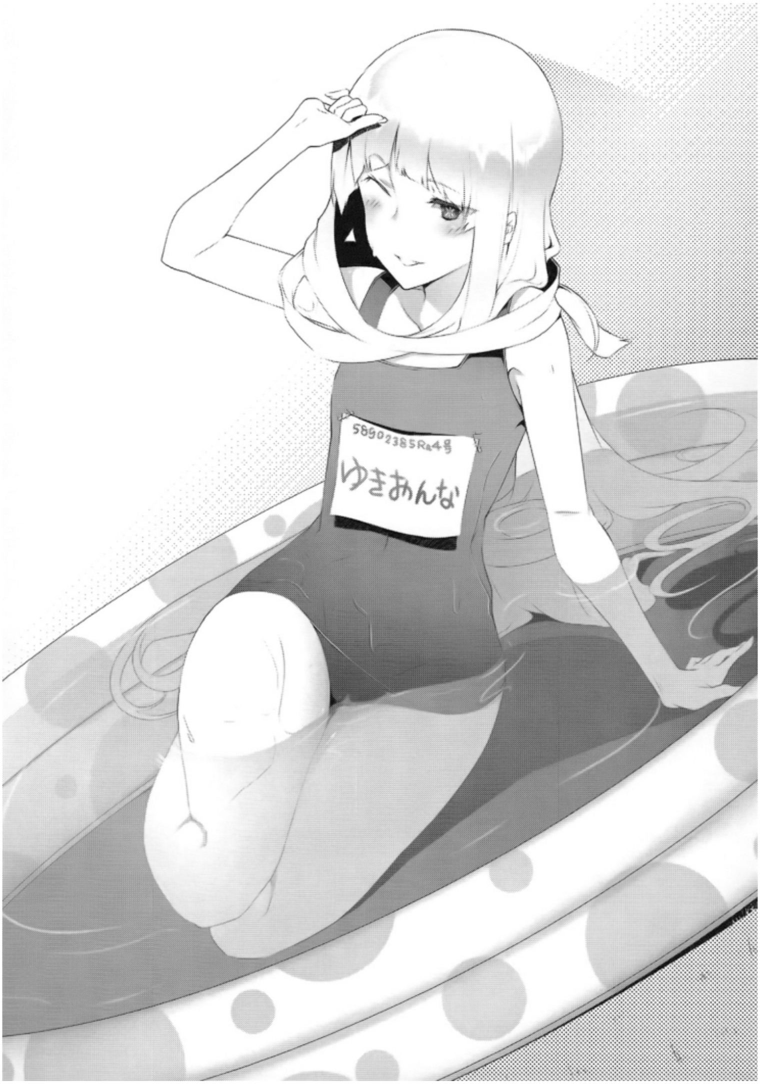
About half the yard was covered by tall tree branches and the sunlight poured down through the gaps in the leaves. For that reason, it had an incredibly harsh contrast between light and shadow. Plus, the wind was shaking the branches, making it all move around a lot. I seriously doubted the camera could take a beautiful photo with its settings so messed up.

And then I found something odd sitting in the middle of the yard.

It was a round plastic kiddie pool.

As I already said, while it was midsummer, it was also an early morning with briskly cool wind. Getting in a pool at this time would only cover one's body with goose bumps, but there were exceptions.

This exception was a Yuki Onna with slightly bluish hair and the general appearance of a 13 year old.



She had previously been a component of a Package, a criminal tool that used the power of a Youkai, but as you can see, she was completely carefree now.

That Yuki Onna usually wore a whitish kimono, but she was wearing a school swimsuit today for some reason.

…*Why?*

For one thing, I was the only student in the house, so you would never find a swimsuit for a female student here no matter how hard you looked.

As the Yuki Onna sat within the chilly plastic pool, her eyes vaguely wandered through the sky.

“…Sigh. An open air bath is nice every once in a while.”

Apparently, she viewed it as a bath despite the temperature. Which begged the question of what she thought about the bathtub we usually soaked in. My grandfather insisted on keeping the temperature really high, so this might be why she insisted she would never get in after him.

I put on the beach sandals sitting on the porch and headed out into the yard.

I figured it would fail again, but I still casually pointed the camera’s lens at the Yuki Onna and took a photo.

Oh? It actually took a nice picture this time?

Hmm…What is going on???

“And an open air bath of course comes with peeping toms. Eh heh heh heh heh heh heh…”

“Oh, is that so? Well, it’s almost time for breakfast, so get to the altar room.”

In my household, the custom was for the family to eat in the living room and the Youkai to eat in the altar room. This was simply because those were the only places where everything could be set up, but once the meal began we would often move around and meet up. This meant the family and the Youkai often did eat together.

These days, the Zashiki Warashi and others tended to come to the living room, but I couldn’t remember how it used to be. I had a feeling I might have taken my dishes to join the Zashiki Warashi in the altar room.

Anyway, the Yuki Onna spoke while blankly staring up from the plastic pool.

“Oh, right. There are some apple sherbets inside the refrigerator. You can have one for dessert if you like…”

“? Did you buy them at the sweets shop?”

“…I am a Yuki Onna. I can make any fruit into sherbet. I can even do it with human flesh."

"Hmm. Then I guess I'll take one. Thanks."

With that, I was about to leave, but for some reason the Yuki Onna twitched within the plastic pool and brought her small hands to her reddened cheeks.

"…F-flattering me like that will not get you anything other than my vagina!!"

"I don't need that!!"

As I frantically tried to hold her in check, I heard another voice coming from up in one of the yard's huge trees. What looked like a white cat was standing on one of the branches covering the sky overhead. But it had two tails. It was a Youkai known as a Nekomata.

"Honestly, what are you doing so early in the morning? You're louder than the cicadas."

"What's wrong, Nekomata? Did you climb up into the tree but can't get down?"

"Are you making fun of me?" asked the Nekomata before easily jumping out of the branch.

To my surprise, she landed on my right shoulder and then jumped down to the ground.

I aimed my smartphone's lens at her and took a photo. The quality was better than the Zashiki Warashi's but worse than the Yuki Onna's. It seemed to be averaging out, but I had no idea what factors the quality was based on.

The Nekomata gently waved her two tails.

"The old woman said she could not sleep because the cicadas were too loud. I do not know if abnormal weather has caused some kind of change to the magnetic field or what, but those fools are singing even in the middle of the night. I made sure to get rid of some of them."

"Hmm. I was so fast asleep I didn't notice at-…Waahhh!!!??? There's a huge pile of dead cicadas in the corner of the yard!"

The pile was about as large as a campfire. She must have been doing it for my granny's sake, but it would be best if my granny didn't see this while gardening. I decided to get a shovel and bury them after breakfast.

The Nekomata must have thought she had done a good deed because she proudly headed for the main entrance of the house.

"You had better not cause any trouble for the old lady either," she said. "No matter how inept you are, surely you can at least do some weeding. We can't have her out toiling under the sun."

"Actually, grandpa and granny believe their health will deteriorate if they aren't out working up a sweat every day. If you do the cleaning or weeding for them, they'll actually get mad at you."

"…Oh? Well, I suppose those two do look stronger than a weakling like you."

It was true I knew I could never stand up to grandfather in a fistfight. The Zashiki Warashi seemed afraid of my dad, but my grandfather would clearly be the more painful opponent. I couldn't exactly imagine my grandmother ever punching anyone, but she could easily carry around the laundry basket at her age. If she got serious, she could probably draw out quite a bit of strength.

"Hey, wait, wait, Nekomata. Don't just go in. When you come in from outside, you're supposed to wipe your paws off with a cloth, remember? In fact, is there really any point in you having our house as your home base? It's not the same as with the Yuki Onna who uses the cold room we use for tsukemono."

"That's just a needless annoyance. In our world, this is normal."

"I thought you didn't want to cause any trouble for my granny?"

The Nekomata fell silent.

Hmm, I might have found a way to control her.

I picked up the obedient white feline Youkai and wiped her paws off with a cloth lying on top of the shoe shelf in the entrance.

And then the dripping wet Yuki Onna approached me from behind.

"…Wipe me off too. Make sure to get into every last unspeakable nook and cranny. Heh heh heh heh heh.”

“This cloth is too small, so just give it up.”

Part 2

After the family and Youkai ate breakfast, I headed out to bury the pile of cicada corpses the Nekomata had made. I used a large gardening shovel to dig an arbitrary hole in the yard and used the tip of the shovel to push the grotesque piece of art into the hole while trying not to look at it.

I had expected it to just be a slight bit of exercise, but digging the hole was surprisingly exhausting.

For that reason, I ended up taking too long.

And that meant…

“Shinobu, didn’t you say you have school today?”

“Noooooooooooooooooooooooo!! You purposefully waited until after it was too late to tell me, didn’t you!?”

Otherwise she would never be grinning like that!!

I frantically dashed from the porch and into the large thatch roof house. I cut through the Japanese-style living room and into the hallway. I then headed straight for my room and grabbed my thin school bag.

“Shinobu, Shinobu,” called my overall small granny from the western-style living room. I noisily ran in that direction.

My granny was holding out something box-shaped wrapped in a cloth.

“Here is your bento. And didn’t you say you were using the pool today?”

“Crap, that’s right! Mom, where’s my swimsuit!?”

I grabbed a small bag containing my swimsuit and ran along the shortest path to the front door, but then I headed back to the living room after realizing I had forgotten my indoor shoes.

Honestly! How much time am I going to lose here!?

With the preparations for my adventure finally complete, I put on my leather shoes and headed out the front door.

And there I found a Zashiki Warashi wearing a red yukata.

“…What are you doing here?”

“Taking a short walk. How about we head together for a bit?” With a triumphant laugh, the indoor Youkai needlessly puffed out her already huge chest. “Walking with a beauty like me is sure to improve your social status.”

Ohh?

However…

I found that hard to believe.

For the most part, the people I knew were already aware that my house’s Zashiki Warashi was incredibly glamorous. In elementary school, I had been constantly flooded with classmates (mostly the guys) begging to see her. However, that Zashiki Warashi was either very cruel or very shy. Even though she would suddenly climb into my futon and on top of me in the middle of the night, she would always disappear somewhere as soon as someone from outside the family came to see her.

I highly doubted that indoor Youkai actually wanted to be the center of attention.

And so she had to have some other reason.

“Hey, Zashiki Warashi. Where are you going? The school’s the other way.”

She jumped in shock.

“The only thing in that direction is the tiny post offi-…wait. No! Don’t tell me you ordered something else off the internet using my PO box and COD!!”

“Y-you must be imagining things. This has nothing at all to do with today being the long-awaited release date of the new model of electric stickboard that I already paid for with your account instead of using COD!!” shouted the Zashiki Warashi before running off full speed in an arbitrary direction like she was heading into the sunset along a river bed.

And if I was not mistaken, she had mentioned something that was even worse than I head feared.

“Wait, you thieving Youkai!! Damn you!! And I don’t have time to chase after her since I’m already right on the brink of being late!!”

I thought about calling the post office to have my PO box frozen, but she had said it was already paid for and that would have been done over the internet. And all in my name. Since she could not even sign a contract for a cell phone, she liked to use that method. Once I got back from school, I needed to make sure she paid me back in cash from her allowance before she could weasel her way out of it.

And as I was thinking about that, I was running along the path to school with fields on either side. The pathway was lined with small solar panels that turned toward the sun like sunflowers.

As I ran, something charged out from the side.

It was neither a high school girl with a piece of bread in her mouth nor a half-assed delinquent charging along on an electric scooter.

It was a large paper umbrella of the old traditional sort.

The umbrella was folded up in a conical shape and a comically large eye and tongue could be seen on its surface

The handle was touching the ground and it ran along like someone hopping on one foot. This Youkai was the type commonly seen drawn on the sign for a cultural festival ghost house.

“…A Tsukumogami?”

“Boy, I have developed past that territory and gained the proper name of Umbrella Obake.”

As the Umbrella Obake ran along, it spoke in a voice as grim as my father’s.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Heading to school?”

“My master has a tendency to leave me behind!! And yet today the forecast said there might be rain this evening!!” shouted the Youkai while widening its already unnecessarily large eye.

But…

“I thought the forecast said a 20% chance of rain this evening?”

“Twenty is plenty!! Think for a second that a box containing 100 scorpions was just placed before you and you were told 80 of those scorpions are not venomous. Would you wish to stick your hand in that box!?”

“…I get it, I get it. You’re overprotective. And the name written on your handle is in hiragana.”

Plus, I did not think that example did a proper job of explaining 20%. If there was even a single scorpion in the box, you had a 100% of being stung.

“I have also heard a Shichinin Misaki has been spotted around this area recently. My master needs me to be a bit extra cautious.”

“…A Shichinin Misaki?”

That was one of the deadly types of Youkai that killed people simply as a characteristic of the species.

I was pretty sure the Shichinin Misaki was a Youkai constantly made up of seven drowning victims. Whenever a new victim was created, the oldest victim would be released to rest in peace. There were various theories regarding what kanji should be used for the “Misaki” part.

But if it was made up of seven people who were all victims, where did the true essence of the Youkai lie? Was the Youkai the invisible framework in which the victims were contained?

“But I thought the Shichinin Misaki was an ocean Youkai.”

“Do not ask me. I only know what I have been told.”

“…Hm.”

When I thought about it, I realized the trouble with the scammer Package using the Yuki Onna had started when I spotted that winter Youkai in the summer.

A Youkai appearing where it should not be might have been evidence of human intervention. I decided to be a bit more cautious than usual.

“Hey, why are you being so quiet? Do you have some idea what could be behind it, boy?”

“No, no,” I said to avoid the issue. “I was just thinking how convenient an umbrella that comes to you if you forget it would be.”

“Heh. I may not look it, but I have been alive for about 150 years. I am nothing like your everyday plastic umbrella.”

“But I don’t think just strapping a GPS to everything would be enough to stop yourself from ever losing anything.”

“Those damn modern conveniences…!!”

The Umbrella Obake gritted its teeth (Did it even have teeth in that comically large mouth?), but it stopped walking when we reached a crossroads between water-filled paddies.

“Oh, my master is this way.”

“Oh, so he is an elementary school kid.”

“Farewell, boy. Try to only run into girls with bread in their mouths thrice a day!!”

“I’ve never even seen a bread girl. Are you sure that isn’t a type of Youkai?”

After parting ways with the Umbrella Obake at the crossroads, I ran full speed for the only high school in the Intellectual Village.

The school only had about 300 students total and the school building itself was fairly small.

However, the Intellectual Village was intentionally designed to appear to be in decline. Given the number of houses, there was no way 300 high school students lived in the village.

“Hey, Shinobu. Run! Keep running! You’ve still got a ways to go to reach homeroom.”

My classmate Tarou called out to me from the dirt schoolyard. He was a healthy school club boy whose casual clothes wore always quite plain, but his name was overwhelmingly gaudy; his given name alone was spelled with 7 kanji. Even our Japanese teacher was confused how seven characters resulted in the reading of

"Tarou".

"Tarou, were you doing morning soccer practice? Have you been doing that every day during summer break?"

"No, I was at a morning job. After feeding the chickens, I still have the most annoying amount of free time. It's more than enough to get to school but not enough to go back to sleep. Those of us who got here early were playing on the schoolyard."

"A job, hm?"

"Unlike those with a house like you, it isn't easy for us boarding students to stay in this Intellectual Village. Of course, the acceptance rate is so low, your odds are about as good as winning the lottery if you don't have any connections from doing this kind of thing."

That was how the village had an unusually high number of youths for its size.

No matter how maintained the environment was, people were needed to run it. Intellectual Villages actively invited in youths to help stabilize that flow.

There were some exceptions though. For example, my dad had refused any part-time workers or lodgers because he was so passionate about (if not addicted to) making sake that he refused to allow anyone who had not gone to an agricultural university into the brewing facility.

As I changed into my indoor shoes at the entrance, I spoke with Tarou.

"So is the Love King coming today?"

"He's out mediating a case of cheating, so probably not today. It takes a strange person to become a specialist in helping out with love troubles for only those already in established couples."

And despite acting like a complete know-it-all when it came to other people's love problems, no one had ever seen this Love King with a lover.

"So I'm still not getting back the manga I lent the Love King before summer break? Anyway, where's Akechi?"

"He's the one the Love King is helping."

"…Eh? So he cheated on Nagisa? Is…Is Akechi okay? Nagisa isn't going to murder him, stuff him, and use him as her dakimakura is she?"

"Why do you think he's getting the help of the Love King?"

"I thought the guy was crazy from the moment he started dating one of the world's three greatest yanderes. He certainly has guts."

I parted ways with Tarou as he went off to change out of his personal sportswear that differed from the school PE uniform and into the school uniform.

I headed up the stairs on my own and then down the hall towards my classroom. That was when my homeroom teacher called out to me. She wore glasses and a simple suit. She was a timid teacher who almost always held the tablet computer she used to take role in front of her face while speaking with someone. She dealt with everything very passively and tended to avoid problems whenever possible. But since she had managed to get selected to live in an Intellectual Village despite being a mere local government worker, she must have been quite the strategist.

"U-um… Jinnai-kun?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Eeee!! Don't scare me with that blond hair! N-no, I mean…um… What I mean is…How was Kotemitsu-san during summer break?"

The "Kotemitsu-san" she mentioned while flinching after every other word was the eccentric beauty of our class, Kotemitsu Madoka-chan. She was not being bullied or anything of the sort, but she was still stuck in an isolated state as she could not seem to fit in with her family or her class.

"Sigh. Is Madoka still not coming to school?"

"W-well, she did actually come…"

"Then why don't you just ask her how she's doing?"

"I don't need to do that!! I need to respect my students' independence! I cannot intrude that far! It would be such an annoyance!!”

Of course, everyone could tell Madoka stood at a higher position than her family or her class, so it seemed more like she ruled above them than that she was being ostracized.

“It looked like Madoka was grinning while watching stock prices as usual. She started laughing and clapping her hands together when the price of gold dropped like a rock, so something must have happened on an international level. Should I ask her about it?”

“N-no! That’s okay! Really, it is!! I will never intrude on my students’ privacy! That is for the best…right?”

As my homeroom teacher spoke, she had a look on her face that plainly said “Don’t get me wrapped in something I can avoid, you damn brat.”

She gestured me forward a bit and then peered secretly through the classroom’s hallway-side window. She was observing a female student wearing a white short-sleeve sailor uniform.

“I just need to know there are no problems. …Hm, but I can’t tell what is going on just by watching from outside.”

I peered into the classroom next to my homeroom teacher…but everything looked the same as usual. The class was chatting while divided into a few different groups while Madoka sat alone at her desk.

For some reason my homeroom teacher started whispering.

“At any rate, enjoy your youth however you like as long as it doesn’t cause me any problems. Specifically, try to destroy this awkward atmosphere filling the class. My path to success is relying on you, Jinnai-kun. See you during homeroom!!”

My homeroom teacher held up one hand in an extremely lazy parting gesture before heading off somewhere.

Please…

Stop using me as your Madoka countermeasure.

But even if she was eccentric, this was a beautiful girl we’re talking about, so I wasn’t about to not do it.

I would never have gone through with if it was merely “the right thing to do”.

After all, I wasn’t like my uncle who had wanted to be a police detective and had actually made it into Department 1 of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department.

“…Ahem.”

I cleared my throat to both check on my voice and to help me change my mode of thinking. I opened the classroom door, stepped inside, and headed straight for Madoka’s desk where she sat looking bored.

“Hey!! Madoka-chan, let’s eat our lunches early!”

“First period hasn’t even started yet! Isn’t that being a little too bold, Shinobu-kun!? And do I need to tell you why girls use such small bento boxes? It’s because we’re worried about what will become of us if we eat too much!!”

What was needed to start a conversation with that “isolated” girl was to find something that would get some kind of emotional reaction. By keeping her from lightly brushing me aside, I had cleared Stage 1.

But…

“……

“Hey, Madoka. Why did you freeze in place as soon as I opened my bento box?”

“…Shinobu-kun? Did you get a chilled meal from a restaurant? No, the thawing process would damage the tissue. Don’t tell me you had it shipped in by air.”

“Don’t be stupid, you damn bourgeois. This is just what my granny made me.”

“…I see,” said Madoka in some kind of admiration.

The way her eyes were glittering scared me. I might have lit a fire in her health-obsessed heart.

“By the way, Shinobu-kun.”

“What?”

“One of my armed guards said he saw a Shichinin Misaki. Do you know anything about that? He was complaining about how odd it is for an ocean Youkai like that to be here on land.”

…*Oh?*

I had thought the Umbrella Obake had been telling me nonsense, but now a professional bodyguard was saying the same thing.

“I don’t know anything about it, but I did hear the same rumor this morning.”

“Hm. Well, he only caught a glimpse of it on a camera recording.”

“The Shichinin Misaki is one of the absolute worst of the deadly Youkai. Don’t you die just by meeting it?”

“It seems viewing from an extreme distance is safe, but if you and Youkai detect each other from within a set range, you’re done for. They terrify the police. Thanks to this, my guards have been on edge. They even tried to deploy a unit around the school campus this morning.”

That was when a dull electronic tone came from Madoka’s cell phone.

She pulled the electronic device from her skirt pocket, read the email, and grimaced.

“…Oh, dear. Shinobu-kun, excuse me a moment.”

“Something related to money?”

“There’s been an unpredictable change that my autonomous investing program can’t handle. I have to manually alter it.”

As she spoke, Madoka used her thumb to press the keys at high speed like a true super high school girl. She was probably altering some values in the settings for a program that automatically bought and sold stocks.

It only took a few dozen seconds to a few minutes.

I had no idea how much a period of time like that was worth to an investor.

With her work done, Madoka tossed her phone on top of her desk.

“Insect damages in Australia. A bunch of locusts are showing up right about now and causing all sorts of problems.”

“…What was that email?”

“The program I wrote is also used by a major investment fund. But the program just monitors the trading parameters. It can’t predict the changes caused by sudden military conflicts or natural disasters. That’s why I ordered the fund advisor to send me an emergency email if anything happens.”

“But what if that major fund betrays you…?”

“I have it set up so any losses that I am not contacted about will be covered by either insurance or compensation. Of course, they’re so dependent on me they could never survive without me. … Otherwise, I would never let them use my precious program.”

I could see how she would have little interest in acquiring the inconsequential relationships of a class when she was living in such a dynamic world. That financial monster who freely rewrote the gears of adult society grabbed one of the omelets my granny had made and tossed it into her mouth with a childish look on her face

“So you get these every day for free?”

“?”

“Ahh, now I really want to live with you, Shinobu-kun…”

I knew she was not the type to care about her surroundings, but I really wished she wouldn’t say that kind of suggestive line in the middle of a classroom filled with our classmates!

Part 3

School that day only lasted until midday, but I was stuck there until evening.

This was because Madoka had not done her summer homework at all.

Normally, I would have simply abandoned her, but she knew my personality a little too well.

“Shinobu-kun, we used the pool today.”

“Yeah, that was the main event. Without the pool, not even a third of the people here would have shown up on such a hot day. I’d still be in my futon.”

“Now, Shinobu-kun. If you will look over my homework, I am willing to undergo your lecture while wearing my still-wet school swimsuit.”

And I was enough of an idiot to be drawn in by the school swimsuit.

Evening came before I knew it as we sat with a desk in between us in that afterschool classroom. I looked over her notes, pointed out errors in her calculations, went over an outline of the designated book for the book report, and pretended to drop my red ball-point pen to get a good look at her thighs.

I wasn’t sure if Madoka had finished her homework or not, but she suddenly left once evening came.

Plus, it turned out the Umbrella Obake’s warning that it might rain in the evening turned out to be dead on!! In fact, it was absolutely pouring! Standing outside without an umbrella for just 5 seconds would probably have left me soaking wet!!

“…Is that why you called me here?” sighed the Youkai in a red yukata who held two plastic umbrellas at the entrance of the school.

I gave a serious reply.

“Normally, I would never expect you to come if I called you by phone, but I figured dad would have straightened things out regarding that order you made without permission this morning. I assumed you would be willing to do what I said for once."

"Uuh…" groaned the Zashiki Warashi as her shoulders drooped.

She was an insolent and prank-loving sort of glamorous Youkai, but it seemed she was no match for my dad.

But…

"Is he really that scary? You know he's named some of the sake he makes 'Red Yukata' and 'Black-Haired Beauty', right? For a leading artisan to name his prized product after you, he must really like you."

"…N-no, it isn't an issue of what he says or does. In fact, he is completely faultless. This is…well, it's a feeling that only Youkai can detect."

Hmm…

So is it like how a parent's love is hard for a child to understand?

As I had that thought, the Zashiki Warashi and I held up our umbrellas. After stepping out into the rain, I turned back towards the school building. A few windows still had people visible in them. They must have been waiting for the rain to end. I didn't see Madoka, but I did see a familiar upperclassman girl. I waved back at her, and she gave a quick nod.

The Zashiki Warashi and I left the school grounds and walked down the path leading home.

"The rain is pretty strong, but I don't hear any thunder."

"I want to see if you actually look like an X-ray image if lightning hits you."

"I wouldn't."

But holding up an umbrella among those wide water-filled paddies did make that a slight worry.

The small solar panels sticking up at set intervals along the path were drooping down lifelessly, but the small hydroelectric turbines set up in the ditches alongside the fields were almost too lively.

Those ditches would have great flows of water roaring along beside the path to and from school during rainstorms, so they could be rather disconcerting.

Of course, they were designed so trash would almost never clog them up and cause the water to overflow.

“I want to stop by the sweets shop.”

“I want to call you an idiot, but maybe I should praise you for not stopping by on your way to school.”

“Actually, I did.”

“I thought as much.”

But I had eaten my granny’s bento before the morning homeroom to start a conversation with Madoka, so I was pretty hungry myself.

I turned off the shortest route home and headed towards the sweets shop.

The Intellectual Village was designed with a focus on creating the atmosphere of a rural village. While we could purchase anything we wanted online, there were few shops from which we could acquire products the instant we wanted them. For that reason, the few shops we did have did quite well despite seeming horribly outdated.

Even so, I doubted to find any other customers during this evening shower.

But I was wrong.

“Hm?”

“There’s some Youkai here.”

The Zashiki Warashi was right.

The Umbrella Obake I had seen that morning was there. And he was not alone. A Paper Lantern Obake with an equally comically large eye and long tongue was floating alongside it. This was the standard pair for a haunted house. I was a bit unsure whether anyone would actually be afraid of them, though.

But something else stood out even more.

A boy of elementary school age was standing in front of the shop. And he was holding the Umbrella Obake like an actual umbrella. The area was growing dark, but it looked like he could also use the Lantern Obake in place of a flashlight.

“You’re the Umbrella Obake from this morning, right? Sorry, but I don’t think I could tell two Umbrella Obake apart even if they were lined up right in front of me.”

Instead of the Umbrella, the Lantern replied in a high-pitched female voice.

“You are a stranger speaking to an elementary school boy? So you are a suspicious person!? I can report this to the police, right!?”

“Shut up, Lantern. You’re the one giving fire to a child. Do you know why lighters are made so hard to light?”

“Heh. I am an LED flashlight inside. That is the perfect method of being good for both the earth and children, don’t you think!?”

“Eh? You want my opinion? …It just makes me wonder whether you can really be called a lantern.”

And since she was a tool made for illumination, I would have thought the candle portion would be analogous to a human’s heart. Sometimes it seemed everything about Youkai was arbitrary.

That was when the boy finally looked up at me.

“…So you know Umbrella?”

“You could say he ran into me with bread in his mouth.”

“Oh,” was the boy’s only response.

Um, no… You weren’t supposed to take that seriously.

If I finally became the protagonist of a love comedy but the love interest was an umbrella, I think I would be left bedridden by how surreal it was.

I guess you could say the boy was a little too unresponsive.

But then…

“Oh, would you look at that. That’s an Intellectual Village for you.

People can look at these strange scenes like they're normal."

I heard a new voice from the side.

We all looked over to find a man in his early twenties wearing a raincoat and raising one hand in greeting. His other hand held a box-shaped case of the type used to hold fishing equipment. He also had a cooler hanging down from a shoulder strap.

However, he did not have a fishing pole.

"Oh, I'm not a fisher. My specialty is Youkai art. I use a fishing case because it's convenient for holding my equipment. With the weather the way it is, I honestly didn't expect to have much luck today, but here I've found something amazing on my first day here."

"Another suspicious person approaching the boy!? You had better be prepared!!"

"Shut up, Lantern," shot back the artist while still grinning.

…A Youkai artist, hm?

TV crews would stop by Intellectual Villages on occasion for programs focused on locations of spiritual or supernatural energy, but it was rare for anyone to come by for artistic purposes. In fact, this was the first time I had ever seen a specialist in Youkai art.

And given how wonderful that Zashiki Warashi was if you focused solely on the visuals, she did seem a good candidate.

"Is it hard dealing with Youkai?" I asked. "They have a tendency to be uncooperative."

"That's true. And a lot of them especially do not like showing themselves before strangers. Really, it's practically a miracle to get to see a Zashiki Warashi like this."

"Did you come to this village for any reason in particular? That is, are you after a specific Youkai?"

"I heard there was an out-of-season Yuki Onna here, but I haven't had any luck so far."

…Oh?

Could he be referring to that one wearing a school swimsuit and sitting in a plastic kiddie pool???

“For future reference, do Youkai like the kinds of sweets sold here?” asked the man.

“If you start giving them this kind of thing, they get really spoiled. It’s best not to try to win them over with treats.”

Ow!?

This good-for-nothing Youkai just stomped on my foot with her high-soled geta!!

Are you trying to crack my toenail open and shove mud inside!?

“This place really is nostalgic.” The artist pulled a toy pistol out from the various products hanging down from the edge of the eaves of the shop. “To be honest, this sort of sweets shop was long gone by my generation, and yet it still feels nostalgic for some reason. This must be one of the effects of an Intellectual Village’s design.”

“Maybe. I couldn’t say since I stop by this place all the time.”

“Ah ha ha. But maybe they were a little too accurate with this toy revolver. It’s made of an alloy, so you could probably shoot real bullets with it if you made a few modifications.”

Then, the Zashiki Warashi standing next to me started tugging on my shirt. I looked around and realized the boy from before was gone. He must have returned home with the Umbrella and Lantern.

The artist did not seem to care and continued speaking.

“Due to the rain, I can’t exactly paint today. But try to find me again once the weather clears up. Not only am I interested in the Youkai, but I’m also interested in the life of people who accept Youkai like something normal.”

Part 4

For dinner, we had chicken and soumen salad.

However, the chicken was so plentiful, I ended up eating too much. It felt like it was going to just sit in my stomach.

The night went on regardless.

For the first time in a while, the Yuki Onna was in a playful mood, so I spent a long time playing Indian poker with her, the Zashiki Warashi, and the Nekomata.

As I had gone to school, I was quite exhausted after that.

I wanted to hurry up and get to sleep in my room, but I had some preparations to take care of first.

The giant thatch-roof house may have seemed luxurious, but it had enough openings to allow mosquitos in.

“Ugh…dammit. I hate doing this…”

I was preparing a traditional mosquito net.

Plenty of mosquito repellant products existed, but it seemed to me that a mosquito net was the most effective since it physically cut off their path. Plus, any electronic method was out of the question. Also, when you lived in an Intellectual Village that was arranged to have such a beautiful atmosphere, it seemed a waste to fill your room with the scent of chemicals.

I hooked the ring-shaped cords of the mosquito net onto the J-shaped latches embedded at about the height of a curtain rail on the four walls and fixed the mosquito net perfectly in place.

But I did not even have time to rejoice at being done.

I suddenly heard an odd scraping noise.

It was a lighter noise than scraping metal.

It was more like…

“…Is that someone washing rice?”

As soon as I said that, the odd noise intensified. It seemed to be making some kind of objection.

“Oh, it’s an Azukiarai[1]. What are you doing here?”

The azuki bean sound (?) replied, but I could make no sense of it.

There were plenty of different types of Youkai, but I have always felt that they can broadly be divided into those that eat meals like humans do and those that do not. This unseen Azukiarai was the latter.

I was fairly certain we had no such Youkai living in our house, but I decided my Youkai-loving mom must have brought it home and let it live in the attic.

But the thought of the attic reminded me of something.

“Come to think of it, that demon that forced its way into the house has taken the attic as its stronghold, hasn’t it? Were you kicked out from there?”

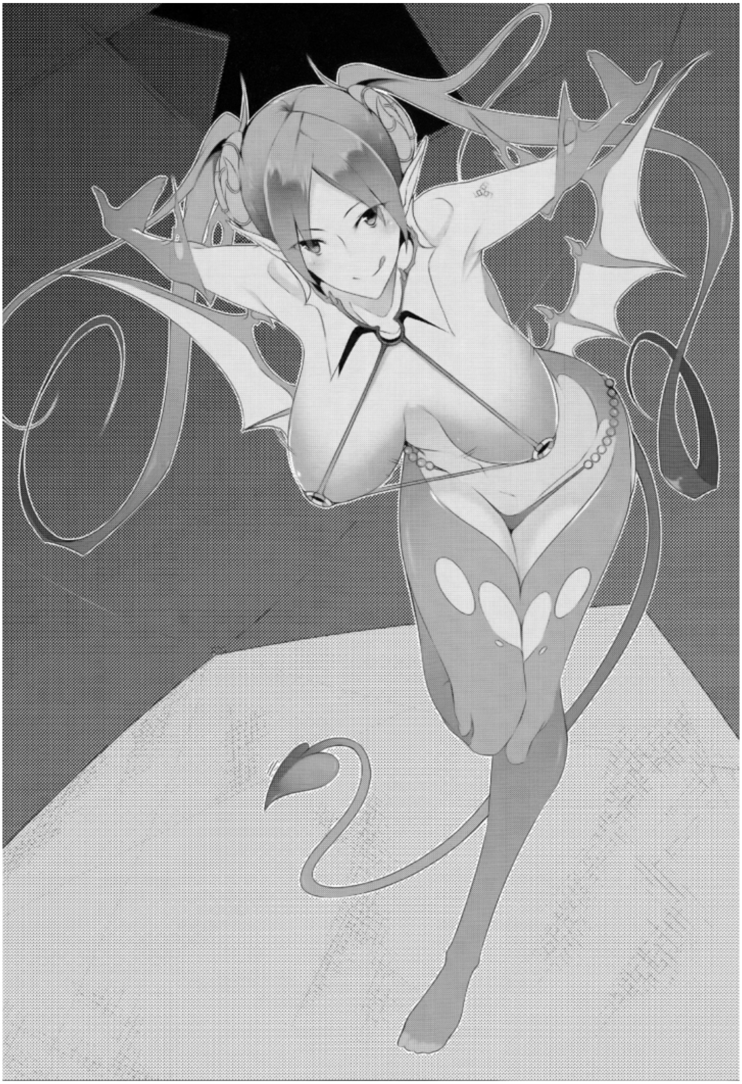
The azuki bean sound seemed somehow sad as it replied.

But I could not have this Youkai relying on me. If it kept making that scraping noise all night long, I would never get any sleep.

I looked around and finally opened the sliding door to my closet.

“At least do it in here. I’ll find a new place for you tomorrow.”

I had no way of knowing if the unseen Azukiarai was moving or not, but it must have agreed because the scraping sound started coming from within the closet. I closed the door and finally finished my preparations for bed.



Just as I was about to turn off the light, another visitor arrived.

And the first noise I heard came from directly above me.

A corner of the ceiling was moved aside, creating a square hole. Someone then poked her head down like a ninja.

She looked like a glamorous woman, but she had goat-like horns on her head, bat-like wings on her back, and an arrow-like tail on her butt. I'm sure anyone can figure it out with that much explanation. She was a demon. She changed her hairstyle based on her mood, but today her long hair was done up in twintails.

“Hey there. Good morning.”

“What do you want, Succubus? I was just about to go to sleep.”

“That’s why I came. And down I come.”

The Succubus descended from the square hole in the ceiling like a ninja. The two objects just barely covered by her stupidly small micro-bikini bounced around. While this was her standard outfit, she prudently wore a T-shirt over it when she was not in the attic and people besides me were present.

This was primarily due to what happened the day she had arrived. She had gotten carried away and had recklessly told my dad “Please let me stay here. I’ll pay for rent with my body☆” My dad had then thrown a real punch to let her know who was in charge.

It seemed my dad’s fist was just as effective on Western demons as it was on Eastern Youkai.

“The men of this house have too little lust. Having nothing to do is starting to make me feel useless as a Succubus. So how about I give you a nice dream?”

“You demons live in a society of contracts, so I doubt you would do that for free.”

“Oh, I already took that into account, master. I need to give you something in return for sheltering me here. I believe in equivalent exchange, so I cannot simply take without giving anything back. Plus, my debt to you periodically increases in the form of rent, so I need to be able to pay you back somehow. Having a demon in a position where she is getting too much and needs to give back is quite rare, though.” The Succubus grinned and held up her index finger. “All I can do is manipulate your dreams, but if you think about it, that can be quite useful. After all, you can do anything in a dream with no consequences!! Nothing is a crime!! You can experience pleasures and warmth that would be impossible in the physical world!!!!!!”

“What!? I hope you know just how much a teenager’s sexual desire can be boiling below the surface!! You had better follow through even if my demands are a lot crazier than you expected!!”

“Oh, of course! That type of thing is the entire reason I exist! How about you use this opportunity to try out something you could never hope to achieve normally, master!? Like something involving animals or internal organs!!”

“…No, you don’t need to go that far. Ugh.”

“Wait, wait. Don’t get that look on your face like you just saw a steak made up entirely of fat. Okay, what sort of thing would fall right into your strike zone?”

“E-eh? I guess something with an older girl…Someone with breasts big enough to envelop anything…Oh, and have her be the graceful type who looks good in Japanese clothing.”

“If you have a specific model in mind, just tell me. That would make the dream very easy to construct.”

“Bh!? There’s no model!! That wasn’t modeled off of anyone!!”

That was important, so I made sure to deny it twice.

The Succubus’s expression made it clear she was not entirely satisfied with that response.

“Okay, in that case, I have taken in your desires, master. Do not worry!! Just climb into your futon and, before you can count to 10, you will have entered a dream world with breasts everywhere you look!!”

“Really!? It does seem a bit empty for it to be just a dream, but now I’m kind of excited!! Can you really do this!?”

“Fwah hah hah!! Like I said: I will present you with pleasures you could never even imagine in this world!!”

After hearing that, there was nothing left but to try it out.

I turned out the lights, climbed into my light summer futon, and was soon in my dreams just as predicted.

But…

I was not prepared for what would happen next.

I never expected to fall into a nightmare where I was chased around all night long by some horrible mystery person whose entire body was covered in breasts to the point that her face could not be seen and she looked like a bunch of grapes.

Part 5 (3rd person)

In the middle of the night when all the lights were out and the thatch-roof house was completely dark, the Nekomata walked along silently. Her(?) usual living space was the area below the porch, but she would enter the house when it rained.

A Nekomata was not actually a cat, so she was not bound by their nocturnal habits. Normally, she would be sleeping during this time. She had a reason to be wandering around at this time.

Mosquitos had been targeting her.

Youkai could not be harmed by any normal methods, so she was of course not being bitten by the mosquitos. Still, having them buzzing around by her ears was keeping her awake.

(It would be wrong to disturb the old woman in her sleep, so that leaves only one other acceptable option.)

With that thought, the Nekomata headed for Jinnai Shinobu's room.

She had been hoping for an electric mosquito repellant, but she found a mosquito net upon entering the room. The sight made the Youkai sigh at how old fashioned it was. But it would still keep the mosquitos away.

While making sure no mosquitos got in along with her, she climbed into the net.

With the annoying buzzing gone, the Nekomata curled up beside Jinnai Shinobu's pillow.

But then her sharp senses detected something.

Her triangular ears pricked up and her vertical pupils opened wide.

She looked around and noticed someone inside the thin summer futon along with Jinnai Shinobu. She flipped back the futon to reveal the Zashiki Warashi.

The annoyed Nekomata said, "What are you doing?"

"What a Zashiki Warashi is supposed to do," smoothly replied the

Youkai in a red yukata. “Unlike in the past, I have to do it without him noticing or he kicks me out.”

“I thought a Zashiki Warashi snuck into futons as one of their childish pranks. What good is a prank if you do it without anyone noticing?”

“I have to work around certain circumstances. If I looked like you, this would probably be a lot easier.”

“Heh.” The Nekomata lightly waved her two tails. “I do think Youkai who belong to a house have it tough because of the constant conflict between their own nature and the customs of the humans, but I can’t let you say I have it easier. I am horribly jealous of Youkai who look like you. The closer to human you look, the easier a time you have being accepted by human society.”

A Nekomata could actually transform into a human form, but it had to kill a human to do it. To a Youkai like her that saw transforming into a human to be that valuable, a Youkai like a Zashiki Warashi that always looked like a human and always received the benefits of it must have seemed a horrible waste of ability.

Of course, the Zashiki Warashi was not thoughtless enough to have never realized that.

However, hers was the sort of personality that led her to stab at that insecurity despite realizing it.

“Looking like a human but never changing at all as time goes on creates problems. People grow jealous of you even though you are a completely different species. Whereas with a cat, not many humans can tell how old you look at a glance.”

“Hah. So are you saying you want a form that allows you to walk around everywhere naked without anyone thinking anything of it?”

“…”

“Oh? …Wait, don’t tell me you’re actually worried about that. What, are you *that* bothered by how this boy’s attitude towards you has changed? Expecting that out of a teenage boy is being too cruel. He can’t always cling to you and call you ‘big sister’.”

“Could you not assume you know what people are going to say before they say it?”

The Zashiki Warashi in the red yukata then covered her head with the futon.

It seemed that assessment had been a bullseye.

It was not often one saw a Youkai sulking over the fact that a human would not let her in his futon or bath.

(No matter how much time passes, that species always acts so childish. What a pain.)

The Nekomata had come to that room to escape the annoying mosquitos, but she decided heading elsewhere would be better than trying to sleep there.

However, she did feel a bit irritated at having that area of rest taken from her as soon as she found it, so she gave the following parting comment:

“If you showed Jinnai Shinobu that face, I think he would start treating you a bit more like a girl.”

A muffled voice in the futon replied, “Don’t joke.”

“I thought as much. If I was in your position, I would probably hang myself.”

With a quick laugh, the Nekomata left.

Part 6

It had rained late into the night, but the weather had cleared up nicely by morning.

As soon as I woke up from that horrible nightmare, I climbed into the attic and chased the Succubus around.

“But with those theoretical values, you should have received pleasure impossible in reality.”

“If that turned me on, I would never be attracted to a normal girl again!!”

After we ate breakfast, the Zashiki Warashi brought up the electric stickboard she had bought (using my credit card without permission). It was a toy that looked like a skateboard with a vertical bar, bike handles, and electric motor attached.

“But you had earned enough points on that site that they sent a special gift.”

“That is no reason to use my account without permission.”

“Here, it’s a keychain. Inside this sphere is actual ocean water! And phytoplankton too!!”

“Nothing about that makes me want it!!”

She had apparently fully charged the battery overnight, so the good-for-nothing Youkai wanted to take it out for a spin.

We ended up on the road in front of the house that was too small to tell if it was meant for vehicles or pedestrians.

“Too fast, too fast, too fast, too fast!! What the hell!? Where’s the brake on this thing!?”

“Shinobu! The right side of the handles is the throttle and the left is the gear change!”

“I’m asking about the brake, you-….bkyabrgrgh!!”

“Ah ha ha ha ha!! You fell, you fell. That would have been a lot funnier if the paddy had water in it.”

I thought about throwing the electric stickboard at the Zashiki Warashi from the paddy that was a level lower than the road, but I changed my mind at the last second.

The Yuki Onna was jogging over and shouting.

“Let me… Let me try it, too…”

“Fine, but how about we all read the manual first?”

I climbed up out of the paddy that was packed full of rice ears. As I did, I spotted a giant paper umbrella and paper lantern moving along the pathway on the other side of the paddy.

…Is that the two from yesterday?

“Oh, curse our master!! Why did he leave without telling us again!? Does he not have a healthy fear of a 30% chance of rain!?”

“Let’s check the sweets shop first! If he isn’t there, we can head to rhinoceros beetle mountain!!”

It seemed their young master had left them running around once more. I was a bit jealous since it was the exact opposite of my situation. The umbrella and lantern were racing down the pathway at quite a good clip.

Meanwhile, the Yuki Onna was noisily fiddling with the different parts of the electric stickboard.

“…Hm, the wheels are quite close. The hem of my kimono might get caught.”

“Then the Zashiki Warashi can’t ride it either!”

“If need be, I can always change into a mini-yukata.”

“Only urban ganguro girls who ignore all tradition are allowed to wear those. If someone like you wore one, the folklorists would fall into despair.”

Come to think of it, why does she only wear yukatas???

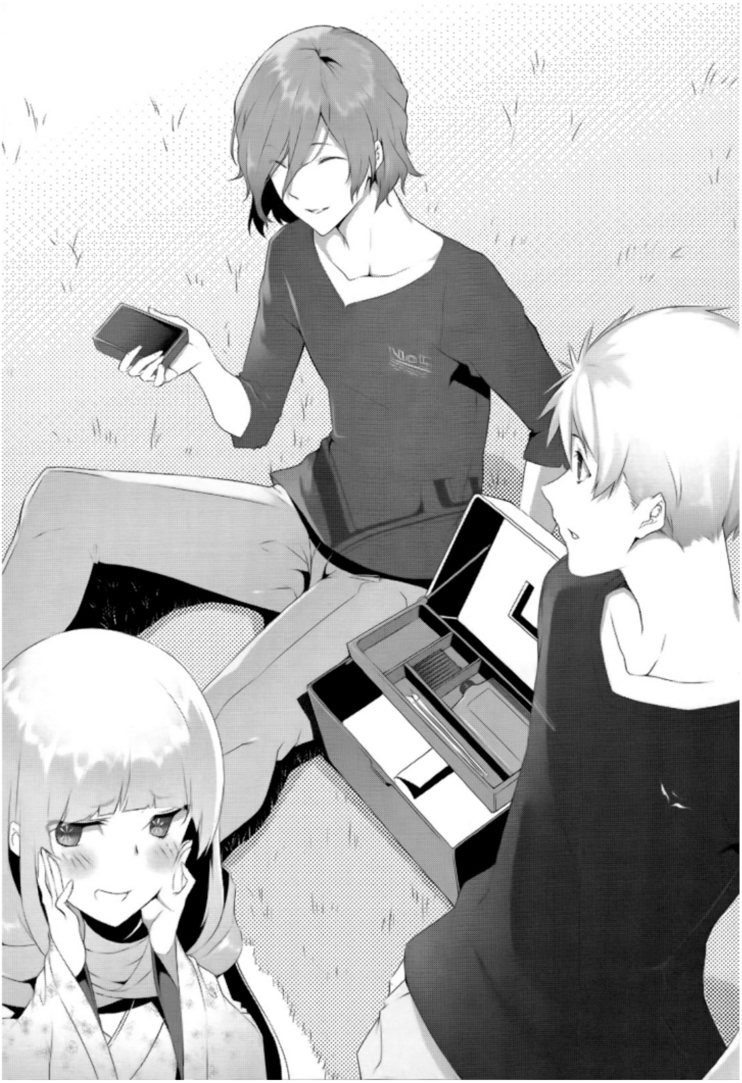
I think she wore normal western clothes once when I was kid, but…

“Oh?”

Suddenly, I heard a voice from a short distance away.

I turned around to spot the young man I had met in the sweets shop.

"You're the Youkai artist, right?"



"You can call me Houjou," replied Houjou-san. "What's important is that I managed to meet the out-of-season Yuki Onna. Will you be playing here for a while? You don't need to stay still like for a portrait. I would love it if you just let me make a quick sketch as if you are part of the background."

“You heard the man. What do you say?” I asked.

“I-it should go without saying that Jinnai Shinobu is the only one allowed to draw lewd shunga of me!!”

“That does not go without saying and this is not a shunga,” I replied.

And so Houjou-san pulled out some Japanese paper and an inkstone and placed them beside him while the rest of us continued playing with the electric stickboard.

After cautiously riding it around for about 10 minutes, we had picked up the basics, so we began a time attack competition based on our lap times on a 100 meter straightaway.

Since he was a Youkai artist, I did not seem to be one of his targets. That let me take things easy, but the Zashiki Warashi and Yuki Onna’s movements definitely seemed a bit stiff.

“A Yuki Onna just standing around is one thing, but is an image of one playing on an electric machine really something you can hang in a Japanese-style room?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I said I was searching an out-of-season Yuki Onna, remember? I wanted this kind of gap. In a way, this is better than I could have hoped.”

“We’ll be leaving at lunchtime. Will you be done by then?”

“More or less. Ink paintings do not take that long to complete. Although that might just be with the methods I have created for painting while I travel.”

The Zashiki Warashi revolutionized our lap times by discovering how to use the clutch to perform a rocket start, the Yuki Onna took the rocket start too far and performed a wheelie, and time passed in the rural Intellectual Village.

“Things sure are peaceful….”

The Umbrella Obake and Lantern Obake I had seen beyond the paddy were now returning the way they had come. It seemed they had not found the boy from their house.

“I want some kind of excitement. Maybe I should buy some fireworks online.”

“Shinobu, if you’re going to get some fireworks, you have to get a set of 50 of the kind that shoot up into the air.”

“You’d just fire them at me, so no.”

“Fireworks, hm?” Houjou-san gave a bitter smile as he moved his brush. “Can you have them delivered the same day if you order them online? But it is supposed to rain again tonight, so I suppose there is no hurry.”

“Oh? I didn’t know that.”

“I use Japanese paper in my work. I have to be careful about the weather and humidity.”

When my overall small granny came to call us for lunch, we left as I had warned.

“Have you finished?”

“Yes, for the most part. But do not worry about me. I will leave once it finishes drying. It’s ink, so that should not take too long.”

And so we left Houjou-san the Youkai artist and returned to the thatch roof house. I looked at the electric stickboard and noticed its battery was already close to dead.

“Oh, c’mon. It dies in less than three hours? You would have a hard time using this in place of a bike.”

“Shinobu, you can buy a better battery for 5800 yen on the site.”

“No, not a chance!! This will be for leisure use only, thank you very much!!”

By the way, lunch was hiyashi chuuka.

Before we had finished eating, I could hear the frogs croaking like crazy and thick dark clouds had started to cover the sky. I headed out to the road again to check on Houjou-san, but the Youkai artist was already gone.

Part 7

By evening, the rain was pouring down.

I ordered a cheap fireworks set using my laptop and was asked to make an impromptu cat house for the Nekomata who was washing her face with her front paw. She seemed worried about the humidity.

Most daily necessities were ordered over the internet in an Intellectual Village, so piles of cardboard boxes from delivery companies could be found anywhere.

“Do not stuff newspaper in there. Do you think you could sleep surrounded by rough scraps of paper?”

“But you would complain if I used old rags because they smell too much.”

“How about you grab that fluffy stuff over there and stuff it inside?”

“Those are Keseran Pasaran. They’re Youkai like you.”

The Succubus must have kicked more harmless Youkai out of the attic because some new ones had appeared. The Kesaran Pasaran floating near the hallway ceiling were Youkai that looked like white furballs about the size of ping pong balls. A few of them were floating in a cluster.

I assumed my Youkai-loving mom had taken them in and hidden them in the attic. The standard pattern in my house was for my mom to take in a Youkai and my dad to kick it out once he found it.

I eventually received the Nekomata’s approval by wadding up some disposable tissues I had received as a gift from an online store but never used. Then the doorbell rang.

The Zashiki Warashi approached and called out to me.

“Shinobu, the doorbell is ringing.”

“Then why don’t you answer it?”

But she was lazy through and through, so there was no hope of that happening. I headed to the front door.

I opened the sliding door and found some unexpected guests.

“If this is a Halloween party, can’t it at least wait until the end of September?”

“I am the Umbrella Obake. And this is the LED Paper Lantern. I believe we met yesterday.”

I’m well aware of that…

Neither the Umbrella nor the Lantern had arms, so I had to wonder how they had rung the doorbell. I sincerely hoped one of them had not used their long tongue.

“We wish to ask if a boy of about 10 came by here.”

“What? You still haven’t found him?”

“H-how do you know we are searching for him!? Don’t tell me your speaking to him yesterday was indeed foreshadowing of something more sinister!?”

“Shut up, Lantern.”

“Wait, why are you grabbing me all of a sudden!? No, do not squeeze from the top and botto-…agrymghh!!”

As I folded up the Paper Lantern that was causing a racket with her high-pitched voice, I asked, “You’ve been running around since this morning, right? How long have you been at it?”

That question created a heavy mood around the Umbrella and Lantern similar to when a human’s shoulders would droop.

It seemed they had found little success in their search.

I sighed and leaned up against the pillar in the entrance.

“Have you gone around to all his friends’ houses?”

“Of course.”

“Have you called his phone?”

“It does not appear to be on.”

"Have you tried the village's notification network?"

"We posted a lost child notification, but we have yet to receive any useful information, boy."

Hmm…

If it had been treated as an emergency notification, a message would have been sent to all the adults' cell phones.

If a friend was simply hiding the boy in their house, the adult of the house would have ignored the child's wishes and contacted the boy's family.

"We have checked all of the locations suggested by his friends. We found nothing there, so we are now going around house by house."

"Well, I suppose there really aren't that many houses in the village."

"But we have found nothing at all. It is possible he is in some sort of outdoors secret base rather than a residence."

In the Intellectual Village, most entertainment was satisfied via online stores, so it had no karaoke boxes, manga cafes, or similar shops. And the closest neighboring town was a fair distance away. Whether they liked the outdoors or not, the only option for a child running away from home was to take some canned bread and bottled water and flee to a secret base. Even I had done it before.

"…But in this rain?"

However, these "secret bases" were usually made from the cardboard shipping boxes. They would not last in this pouring rain. That was why the adults would demolish them when they were found.

"Hm, so where could he be?"

"Sorry for the interruption. If you learn anything, please post in the lost child information section of the notification network."

With that said, the Umbrella and Lantern headed back out into the pouring rain.

…

"Hey."

"What is it?"

"You know the mountain the Sanatorium is on, right? The southern base of it has been the standard spot for building secret bases for ages. I doubt he's there in this rain, but it's possible he's playing there if they've managed to build a proper hut of plywood or plastic or something."

The Umbrella and Lantern leaned forward slightly. It might have been meant as a bow.

But I remembered something as soon as I slid shut the front door.

"…Huh?"

"Shinobu."

The Zashiki Warashi and Nekomata approached the front entrance.

"If he's built a secret base on the southern side of Fruit Mountain, this might be dangerous."

"What do you mean?" asked the Nekomata as she tilted her head.

I explained while also putting my own thoughts in order.

"That area is just an undeveloped open field. Unlike the orchards that produce 30,000 yen bunches of grapes, you don't get into any real trouble if you sneak in. That's why the kids like bringing cardboard boxes there to create secret bases."

"So are there snakes there?"

"No." I shook my head. "But now that I think about it, the situation is a bit different from when I was a kid. The orchards on the slope of the mountain were taken out by water damage since then. Irrigation ditches weren't enough to handle the rainwater caused by sudden rainstorms, so they built a flood control reservoir for emergencies. *Normally, there is nothing in that empty field, but huge amounts of water can be guided there to protect the valuable orchards.*"

"…"

The Nekomata fell silent and looked up at the ceiling.

The rain could be heard beating loudly against the roof.

Finally, the Nekomata said, “That is bad.”

“Yes, it is! The area is supposed to be off limits nowadays, but they do find collections of cardboard boxes there occasionally. The kids probably still make secret bases there. If the floodgates are opened, the entire area will be covered in water!! If he really is there…!!”

“Shinobu, do you think this rain will be enough for the floodgates to be opened?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think it’s quite that bad yet. Opening the floodgates is a last resort. The general consensus is that it shouldn’t be done unless absolutely necessary. I doubt they’ll do it unless we get typhoon-level rain.”

We hurried to my bedroom and I opened up my laptop.

I connected to the Intellectual Village’s neighborhood association notification network and checked the disaster message board.

When I saw one thread name highlighted in the color for an emergency, I felt a bit faint.

Important notification regarding the floodgates for the flood prevention reservoir on the southern slope of Fruit Mountain.

“Not good… *They’ve already been opened!?*”

I left checking the message board’s information to the Zashiki Warashi while I pulled out my cell phone to contact the fire department just in case. But would they do anything? The Intellectual Village was quite well equipped when it came to putting out forest fires, but I could not think of any actual rescue personnel for other disasters.

And then the operator said the following:

“Are you absolutely sure this child was in the emergency flood prevention reservoir area?”

“No, but…”

“We will send some men in, but it would be difficult to have the floodgates closed. They were opened to prevent definite losses. Unless you have more definite information…”

“Understood. Sorry. As long as you check. Please just have someone check for a drowning child!”

I hung up and felt like punching the wall.

“That’s no help at all! I get the feeling they’ll just send two or three men out to arbitrarily look around. And it’s going to be completely dark soon. If they walk around a bit and point a flashlight around, they’ll never find a small child!!”

I checked the clock.

It was 6 PM.

Due to the thick clouds covering the sky, it felt even darker than usual.

“Hey, Zashiki Warashi. You bought a whole bunch of disaster goods a while back, right? Where did you put them? I want a powerful flashlight.”

“…You’re heading out now? Have you never heard of secondary losses?”

“I won’t go too far. Just get me a flashlight.”

“Helping and getting yourself involved are two different things. You do realize you are crossing a line here, right?”

“I realize I only have a side role in this. I’m not heading out to battle some strange final boss. I’m just going to go check. If I don’t find anything, I’ll come right back.”

The Zashiki Warashi sighed and headed back to her room.

The Nekomata looked up at me.

“Have you checked your cell phone? Does that old beat-up thing have GPS functionality?”

“Yes, and I have it turned on. But the phone isn’t waterproof, so if I drop it in the water, it’s done for.”

“Then we’ll start panicking if the signal disappears.”

I took a flashlight from the Zashiki Warashi when she returned and then turned toward the front door.

"They'd definitely try to stop me, so don't tell dad and the others what I'm doing even if they ask."

"…Shinobu. That request makes me very worried."

"Don't worry. I'll make sure he only gets mad at me. Anyway, I don't have time. Could you lend me the electric stickboard we were using this morning? You've been charging it since lunchtime, right?"

That was not a toy you could carry an umbrella while riding.

I charged through the pouring rain as I rushed for the submerged flood control reservoir.

Part 8

By the time I reached the southern base of Fruit Mountain, the area was completely dark.

I let the electric stickboard fall to the ground and switched on my flashlight. The area was so worthless no one cared if it was submerged, so it naturally had no streetlights. I lightly swept the light across the area and spotted the Umbrella and Lantern standing in a daze amid the noisily pouring rain.

“Hey, what is it? Did you find the boy!?”

“…I-is our master really out here?”

“A-are…are you sure you were not mistaken?”

I walked up next to the two speechless Youkai and shined the flashlight on the emergency flood control reservoir.

The situation was very bad.

Normally, the area was nothing but a green field covered in short undergrowth. Everything would look the same in every direction except for the occasional cardboard box secret base built by the children. That lack of maintenance allowed it to feel more raw and natural than the maintained orchards of the Intellectual Village.

But now it was all pitch black.

This was due to the water.

With a deep rumbling of flowing water, the entire area looked like the sea at night. Everything from the short underbrush to the cardboard box secret bases had been swallowed up. That flat black surface covered everything. Not even the light of my flashlight could penetrate the water, so I had no idea how deep it was.

It was so much that I almost lost my balance for a moment.

Searching for something in that water would likely be harder than finding a ring cast into the sands of a desert.

“Lantern. You can fly, right?”

"Y-yes. Not very high, though."

"Then you fly over the flood control reservoir and call out his name. Come to think of it, what is the boy's name?"

"Yonesaki Hiro-sama."

"Hey, boy. What should I do?" asked the Umbrella.

In response, I grabbed his handle.

I then turned him upside down and stabbed him into the water from the edge of the path.

"Excuse me a moment."

"Gyahh!!"

"So it's about a meter deep. He was about 130 cm tall, so he might be able to keep his head above water if he tries."

I pulled the Umbrella out of the water and released him.

But the depth could change depending on the location and the ground might grow soft from the water and suck his legs in. I decided it would be best not to be too optimistic.

The Umbrella coughed up the water that had gotten in his mouth. (Where did the water go?)

"H-honestly. People these days do not know how to treat their tools!! It is because of you savages that you almost never see a Tsukumogami in the form of a computer or cell phone!!"

"While the Lantern searches above the reservoir, you and I can head around the perimeter."

"You're not listening at all, are you!?"

I ignored the Umbrella's complaints and began our rather unreliable search.

The outer edge of the flood control reservoir was simply constructed by piling up dirt, so I was a bit afraid it would collapse as I walked along it. I pointed my flashlight around in the darkness and shouted the boy's name, but I received no response. Occasionally I would stop in shock when I saw something large floating on the dark surface of the water, but it always turned out to be a cardboard box from one of the secret bases.

“Hey, Umbrella. You went around asking about this Yonesaki Hiro boy, right? Do you know who he was playing with?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Playing make believe in the secret fortress is like playing tag or hide-and-seek. It isn’t something you normally do on your own. If the floodgates were opened while he was building a base here, some other kid might have been swallowed up too. It would be best to know how many kids we need to be looking for.”

Also, there was no sign of the fire department arriving. I had seen no vehicle parked nearby. It was possible they had decided my call was nothing more than a prank.

“…”

The Umbrella remained silent for quite a while but finally spoke quietly as if he could not withstand the pressure of the darkness.

“It is possible our master did not come here to play.”

“What?”

The area had been turned into an emergency flood control reservoir because there was nothing there. I could not think of any reason to go to the field other than to play.

“Youkai like us do not know much about human schools, but they would warn the children not to play in places like this, correct? The same as they warn the children not to play in rivers or head into the mountains on their own.”

“…Probably. What about it?”

“In other words, our master would have known how dangerous this place is.” The Umbrella let out a heavy breath. “What if that is why our master chose to come here at this time? *What if he was seeking that danger?*”

“What are you-…?”

I trailed off as I felt like my heart was being squeezed.

I had realized what he meant.

"You don't mean…*Yonesaki Hiro was waiting here for the floodgates to open so he could drown himself?*"

Suicide.

A child that young was committing suicide?

I could not imagine how that could happen, but a high schooler like me could not understand the complexity of an elementary schooler's world. I had once walked down that path, but I could no longer recall the real details of the time.

Was it possible?

Could something really make a child of about 10 completely give up on the world?

"Lately, it has seemed our master has been constantly worrying about something. He has been eating less. And he will not tell Lantern or me what is worrying him."

"You said you checked with Yonesaki Hiro's friends today, right? So he has friends."

"Yes. He is not having problems with his friends. Nor have we seen any discord in the family. …So I have no idea what it is. He has obviously been worrying about something, but I cannot tell you what that might be."

"…"

It was true that people often held problems that could not be seen in their day-to-day lives.

I pulled out my cell phone, but I could not perform a search because its internet connection was too weak. I had no choice but to contact the Zashiki Warashi by calling the smartphone (my smartphone!) that she had.

"I need to find any records a boy named Yonesaki Hiro has left online. Can you search for me?"

"Most people do not use their real name. Do you know what screen name he might use?"

I turned to the Umbrella and asked, “What did Yonesaki Hiro’s friends call him?”

“Yonecchi.”

“Search for Yonecchi,” I said to the Zashiki Warashi.

After a few dozen seconds, she replied, “I found him on 4 Line Net. It’s a popular SNS these days.”

“That’s the type that only lets you make short posts, right?”

“I can only get the information set as public, but I can see him posting about his classes and other things he’s done. This account definitely belongs to an elementary school kid from Noukotsu Village. He even names the neighborhood sweets shop.”

“Is he being bullied online?”

“Not really. But I think 4 Line Net has comment viewing levels of ‘close friend’, ‘friend’, ‘personal acquaintance’, and ‘general acquaintance’. Any important information wouldn’t be open for anyone to see.”

“Can you check any further?”

“I am a Youkai, not a super hacker.”

…Hm. But come to think of it, isn’t there someone in my class who knows about this kind of thing?

I hung up on the Zashiki Warashi and called the eccentric beauty Madoka-chan.

“What is it, Shinobu-kun?”

“Help me.”

“That certainly is straight and to the point. Has something happened?”

“Madoka, you know a lot about the internet because of your stock trading, right? There might be some traces of criminal activity hidden in 4 Line Net comments restricted from public viewing. Is there any way to get access to them?”

“I see, I see,” said Madoka offhandedly. “What search engine are you using? Try using Free Load."

"Do you want me to check the cache data?"

"That won't be enough. Use the image search. It's meant to search for image data, but it also takes a sample of the text on the page. That should pierce straight through a site like 4 Line Net. Search for an image file unique to the user and it should display it all for you."

"You sure know a lot of about this."

"Well, it used to be popular as a means of acquiring insider information."

"…Madoka-san?"

"I never used it. My autonomous investing program doesn't need that sort of information."

I thanked her and hung up. Then I called the Zashiki Warashi again and instructed her in what to do.

"You take advantage of all sorts of women, don't you?"

"Please don't say things that make me sound bad. So did you find anything?"

"…Oh, my. This is full of suspicious text. It looks like this Yonecchi believed everything he was told by someone he had never seen. Do you think this was some kind of Youkai power?"

"Paste the text and send it to me."

I received an email.

When I read through it, I frowned slightly.

"I think this might be a technique known as journal profiling. People psychologically analyze the available text to respond with comments that will receive the most positive response. A few of these comments almost perfectly match the ones on the alert from the police's website."

It was the same as a test that let you freely draw a picture to determine your psychological condition. Blogs and SNSs could be quite defenseless in that regard.

“That’s the method the administrator of that suicide site from a while back used to gather participants, right?” asked the Zashiki Warashi.

“Yeah, but I think he drowned himself when he was about to be arrested for assisting in the suicides. …Wait. But the Youkai used for that was…”

“A Shichinin Misaki, right? The article I read on a news site gave a quick mention of the Package.”

The suspect from that incident was gone.

But it was still possible someone else was reusing the Package for their own purposes or that someone else had been involved in the initial incident as well. And the Umbrella and Madoka had both mentioned recent Shichinin Misaki sightings.

“By the way, what kinds of worries were used to provoke Yonecchi?”

“It isn’t spelled out, but reading between the lines, I think he was afraid of having to say goodbye to his friends.”

…

I fell silent and looked over at the Umbrella, but he merely rotated his entire body back and forth as his version of “shaking his head”.

“I have heard nothing about any of his friends at school moving away.”

“No,” said the Zashiki Warashi.

“So he does have some friends moving away?”

“No, it isn’t that. These friends are not the kids from school.”

“?”

The Umbrella’s thoughts seemed to have frozen up, but I had more or less grasped the situation.

The “friends” Yonesaki Hiro mentioned were…

“Someone came to 4 Line Net and provoked him with the following,” said the Zashiki Warashi smoothly. “ ‘What if there was a method of becoming a Youkai just like your precious friends?' "

The Umbrella remained silent for a while.

His movements had completely stopped.

"It's a pretty common issue," I said. "Especially in an Intellectual Village. Youkai live with you, but their lifespans are much, much longer than your own. That means you have to say goodbye to them eventually. That is what he was afraid of."

But what was this "someone" hoping to gain by provoking him with that desire?

A method of becoming a Youkai.

Was that simply a convenient means of luring in a specific person or was that itself the goal?

I asked if any of the posts gave more details, but the Zashiki Warashi's response was not what I was hoping for.

"It seems 4 Line Net was simply used to gain Yonecchi's trust. The person invited him to speak further using free email addresses. The specifics would have been discussed using them."

"That makes this sound all the more suspicious."

In all likelihood, the boy had been instructed to delete his email address after the needed information had been exchanged. In that case, not even contacting the server company would get us anything. A decent company would delete the entire cluster of personal information. It would all be gone.

"Do you really think there is a means of becoming a Youkai?" asked the Zashiki Warashi.

"I don't know."

Humans and Youkai were completely different life forms. It would likely be more difficult a task than turning a human into a mountain gorilla.

I thought for a bit and then…

"You said you saw an article on a news site about the suicide site that gathered participants using journal profiling, right? Did that have details of the Package used?”

“No. I don’t know if the police never figured it out or if they wanted to prevent any idiots from copying it, but no details were given. However, it seems the key to the Package was how to get the people to meet the Shichinin Misaki that kills anyone who meets it.”

“Was there no other hint?”

“An alibi hotel.” The Zashiki Warashi used a term that had been popular on talk shows a while back. “A website is created for a fictional hotel. For the price of a suite, an alibi is created for the person whose personal information is given. That was used so the targets who would never have met the Shichinin Misaki would have met it on paper. What do you think, Shinobu?”

“If that was enough to kill someone, anyone could easily kill the secretary-general of the UN or the president of the US. That would have only been the first stage. After those initial preparations, they would need to actually approach the target to prepare some kind of setting.”

“And that is the flood control reservoir?”

“I don’t know, but they wouldn’t have called him out here for no reason.”

“What about the police?”

“We should probably report this.”

I hung up and a sudden question burst out of the Umbrella.

“Wh-what is going to happen to our master!? Is he here!? Or has he been taken elsewhere!?”

“We don’t know anything yet! It’s still possible he’s just drowning here. For now, we just have to rule out every possibility we can.”

That was when I heard a rumbling noise.

I pointed my flashlight toward it and found the opening to a water pipe tunnel directly below the edge we were standing on. The flood control reservoir was not simply a place to gather water. It only had so much area. The water flowing in was sent through other pipes to disperse the rainwater as much as possible.

The tunnel was about a meter across and the bottom half was filled with water. I would likely be able to enter it if I crouched down.

The Umbrella and I leaned over and I pointed the flashlight into the tunnel.

“I can’t see very far in. I can’t even tell if it heads straight or if it curves.”

“Ah! Isn’t that the straw hat our master was wearing!?”

“Where? Is it just the hat!?”

“Further in. I can see just his hat caught on the edge…”

“Where!?”

“I already told you: further in!!”

“Yes, but where further-…!?”

I suddenly trailed off.

I had completely lost my balance. I could hear the Umbrella shouting something, but I couldn’t make out what. I had sunk into the muddy water headfirst, so I could only hear a bubbly, muffled sound.

I was near the large water pipe, so the current was intense.

I immediately began flailing my arms around, but I could find nothing to grab onto. I was swept into the large opening of the water pipe.

“Cough!! Cough cough!!”

I somehow managed to get my head above water, but I had already been sucked completely into the tunnel. I pointed my flashlight toward the entrance and was shocked to see how far from it I had been swept. I was too far for the light to reach the entrance. I had already traveled several dozen meters. And the powerful current was still sweeping me further and further in.

I still had no idea if there had actually been a straw hat there or not.

I tried to brace my arms and legs against the edges of the tunnel to hold myself in place, but I still slipped further in bit by bit.

I began to wonder if it would be best to go with the flow and leave through the exit on the other end.

But there was no guarantee the water level would remain the same. If the water pipe tunnel headed down underground, it was entirely possible the entire thing would be filled with water.

“Shit!!”

I gave up on trying to gain footing and instead tried to swim through the muddy water, but I could not gain any ground no matter how much I flailed my arms and legs around. In fact, I could tell I was being swept further in.

My body was flipped over and I was rolled around in the tunnel so much I lost any sense of up or down. The direction filled with air and the direction filled with water swapped back and forth so much I could no longer tell if I was sucking in air or swallowing mud.

The hard feeling of the flashlight left my hand.

I was swept on and on and on through the pitch black tunnel.

Maybe…

Maybe I shouldn’t have tried to do something so out of character…

Part 9

"…Cough…cough…"

I let out a groan while coughing up what might have been water or might have been mud. The suffering I felt told me that I was still alive.

But where was I?

The next thing I knew, I had been dumped out of the dark tunnel. I sat up from lying on my back and realized I was in a ditch running through a paddy field.

"Wait, that's not it."

The sun had already set so it was pitch black and the pouring rain cut my visibility down even further.

Even so, I stared intently at my surroundings. At first glance, it appeared to be a paddy field, but nothing was growing in it despite it being the end of August. And the large paddy field was surrounded by something like wooden planks so I could not see out.

…Is this field not being used anymore?

From how thick the walls surrounding it were, I guessed it might be another proposed site for a flood control reservoir.

I crawled out of the ditch while dragging myself along after my clothes had grown several times heavier due to soaking in water and mud. I pulled out my cell phone, but it was completely broken. I clicked my tongue without meaning to.

The area was so dark I could not see much of anything, but I still had to try.

The area seemed to be an old unused paddy field with a ditch running through the middle, but it was not covered entirely in flat dirt. At one point and one point only, the dirt swelled up. It was similar to the space prepared when someone wanted to create a grave on their own land instead of at a Buddhist temple.

The area of dirt was about 10 meters square.

It appeared large stones had been laid across on top to create a foundation.

But…

“…It isn’t a grave?”

The stereotypical tombstone was not there.

In its place was a small shabby wooden hut.

It was not large enough for someone to enter. It was only about a meter across on each side. It was supported by a small leg, so it reminded me a bit of a Stevenson screen.

What is that?

This was inside of an old unused paddy field that was surrounded by wooden planks. I did not think anyone would be able to see inside from outside the field, so I doubted this was something the owner of the land had built. *It was more likely that someone else had put it here so the people of the village would not know it was here.*

I approached it with my feet sinking into the mud.

It was too dark to see the details, but the small hut did not look very old. Its color and texture were spot on. It might have been created out of materials taken directly from actual antique wooden buildings. However, the nails or the adhesive used may have been new because I could smell an odd scent.

Was it a small hut or a small shrine?

At any rate, I stood in front of it and opened its double-doors.

“…What is this?”

I found something unexpected within.

It was nothing related to the occult like a Buddha statue or a Shinto shintai[2].

It was something in the complete opposite direction.

“A handgun?”

The barrel glittered with a silver light. The grip was covered in black rubber. It appeared to be a stereotypical six-shot revolver. But when I cautiously reached out and touched it with a finger, it felt somehow odd. I had never held a real handgun, but it felt so cheaply made even I could tell something was off. It seemed to be made of metal, but something like paint had been added on top. Color had been added to make it seem more solid than it was. A real gun would not need such a trick.

…*Is this a toy?*

I touched the black rubber grip and a question caught in my mind.

What was this doing in a place like this?

And…

I also felt like I had seen the exact same thing somewhere. But where? I felt as if it had been quite recently.

But then…

"…What are you doing?"

I suddenly heard a voice from directly behind me. It was a high-pitched soprano voice. But it was not a girl's voice. It was the voice of a boy before his voice changed. It was not the voice of anyone I knew very well, but I was still fairly certain I knew who it was.

I turned around.

I found a boy of around 10 standing there. Perhaps due to the Umbrella not being here, he was soaking wet from the pouring rain. But he was still not as muddy as me. He may not have passed through that water pipe or he may have passed through it before the rain began.

But even so…

This was an old empty paddy field being used as a flood control reservoir, so *where had he been hiding?*

That question swelled up in my mind, but I had something else to check on first.

"Yonesaki-kun? You're Yonesaki Hiro-kun, right?"

I was a little unsure of how formal I should be when speaking to a child of that age, but this was no time to worry about that. I ended up asking my question in my usual brusque manner.

The boy nodded his head.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

That was stage 1 clear.

But I asked another question just to be sure.

“Did you come here alone? You weren’t with any other friends, were you?”

“I came alone.”

When I heard that response, I finally felt my body relax with relief. Everyone was safe. I did not need to worry about any other children having been swallowed up in that torrent.

As long as I could safely return this boy to the Umbrella and Lantern, the entire incident would be over.

That meant my biggest concern was the actions of whoever had lured Yonesaki Hiro out here. Yonesaki Hiro himself had said he came here alone, but I was afraid this mystery person might be lurking in the darkness somewhere.

“You know the Umbrella and Lantern, right? They’re really worried about you. But you just need to get home for now. I’ll tell the two of them I found you.”

“No,” replied Yonesaki Hiro. He continued speaking while standing still in the middle of the pouring rain. “I’m not going home. *I was told I would be turned into a Youkai if I stay here.*”

“…By who?”

“…”

My question was met with silence.

It seemed he was not willing to answer just anything. That was not too surprising as the boy had no real reason to open his heart to me.

Given how muddy I already was, I decided it was pointless to worry about my clothes. I sat down in the mud so I could stare the short Yonesaki Hiro in the eye before speaking again.

"Hey, listen to me."

"…"

"Anyone should know it would be difficult to turn a human into a Youkai. Are you saying you can do it? How? A Yuki Onna and a Zashiki Warashi may look just like us, but they are completely different inside. Even if I decided today I would become a Yuki Onna, I wouldn't be able to. Don't you understand that?"

"I can do it."

His reply came almost immediately.

I had denied what he believed in. This was only a reflexive response to that, but it was better than silence.

"I can do it. I was told I can. So…"

"Is everything people tell you true? Then let me tell you something: a human cannot become a Youkai. Will that change your mind? Will it convince you? Will it?"

"I can become a Youkai!! I can because I waited here for that person!!"

"Again: who is this-…"

My question trailed off as my words caught in my throat.

I frowned.

"Wait. *Why did you just use the past tense*?"

"…"

"You didn't say you could become a Youkai if you wait for this person. You said you can because you waited for them. That's what you said, right? Why?"

"Because…"

"Don't tell me you already met them!? With who!?"

The darkness surrounding me suddenly seemed to stab sharply at me. I could feel malicious intent coming at me from all directions. Was the person nearby? Who was it? What had they done while meeting with Yonesaki Hiro? This meant the person was not simply trying to kidnap the boy. Had they set up some kind of trick that would *automatically bear fruit* after the fact?

Did Yonesaki Hiro understand what had happened to him?

The boy then shouted out as if I had angered him by insulting his family and friends.

“*With the Shichinin Misaki!! I was told I can be one of them!!*”

I felt a chill run down my spine that was not from the muddy water. It was much colder.

The Shichinin Misaki.

The Umbrella and Madoka had both mentioned it.

They had mentioned sightings around here despite the Shichinin Misaki being an ocean Youkai.

But…

“You idiot… That thing is completely deadly! And not just on the level of a Yuki Onna or Nekomata. *It supposedly kills any human it meets.* That’s about as deadly as it gets!!”

Was a wild beast covered in powerful muscles frightening?

Was a wild beast equipped with razor sharp fangs and claws frightening?

The answer is obviously yes. But the strength of Youkai is not the same as that of normal animals. The most frightening species of Youkai are the ones that have irrational deadly abilities.

If you merely meet them, you die.

If you merely have anything to do with them, you die.

Those ones were the truly deadly ones.

At that point, I felt like I had finally seen the whole picture.

Having Yonesaki Hiro meet the Shichinin Misaki had been the criminal's goal.

After the target had been designated using 4 Line Net and the alibi hotel, some method would be used to send the Shichinin Misaki to the same area as the target. Normally, a Shichinin Misaki would wander around aimlessly simply spreading damage. However, once the Shichinin Misaki had already "met" Yonesaki Hiro online, their characteristics as a Youkai would take over and send them straight for the boy like a guided missile.

It was an assassination Package that accurately killed only the designated target while disguising it as suicide.

But I could not grasp why the criminal would use such a complex plan against a boy like Yonesaki Hiro. Was it simply a test or did killing Yonesaki Hiro hold some great meaning?

"No. No! I was told I would get to be part of the Shichinin Misaki. It isn't going to hurt me!!"

"You know the Shichinin Misaki is a rather vague Youkai, right?"

"Yes, even I know that."

"It always appears before humans in the form of a group of seven drowning victims. It kills any human that meets them. The oldest drowning victim is annihilated and the person just killed takes up the position at the end of the line. It's that repeating pattern…that loop construction that is actually the invisible Youkai known as the Shichinin Misaki. The drowning victims you see are like its clothes or accessories. That is not the same as being one of them."

The Shichinin Misaki may have been about the most deadly Youkai there is, but it was not good or evil itself. If anyone was to blame, it was the person who had led the Shichinin Misaki here to meet Yonesaki Hiro.

Yonesaki Hiro was not seeking his own death, but the end result was not much different.

He wanted to go somewhere else.

He wanted to become someone else.

Anyone had those thoughts at some point or another, but to me it seemed they had been forcibly twisted to make the boy wish to die as an escape.

“But I was told I would be turned into a Youkai,” repeated Yonesaki Hiro obstinately. “I was told the Shichinin Misaki coming to me was a special one that would turn anyone into a Youkai if they want it. It can ignore the limit of seven. No one has to disappear. Everyone can become one of them and be a Youkai.”

Become a Youkai.

Become the same sort of being as the Umbrella and Lantern.

That way he could avoid the inevitable goodbye with his close friends.

If that was what Yonesaki Hiro wished for, would that infinite Shichinin Misaki really appear so wonderful? But if it was true, wouldn’t this special Shichinin Misaki transform into some horrific existence as the endless pile of drowning victims piled higher and higher?

Becoming a portion of the Shichinin Misaki may indeed mean becoming something other than a normal human.

But would that really be an existence equal to the Umbrella and Lantern?

A fish that could freely swim through the ocean and fish meat made by smashing up the flesh and bones seemed like different things to me.

It seemed unfair for the person behind this Package to demand the boy make his decision without having any of the trickier issues explained to him.

“Hey.”

“…”

“Listen. Look at me. Come to think of it, I never asked you one thing. You keep saying you will become a Youkai, but why do you want to become one?”

“…”

“This silence isn’t because you refuse to answer. You’re embarrassed. I understand."

"How can you-…!?"

"How can I understand?"

I gave a scornful laugh.

Oh, dammit. Understanding this is easy. It embarrasses me too!!

"When writing about their dreams for the future, children in Intellectual Villages will occasionally say they want to become a Youkai. …In my case, I started writing it in elementary school. Everyone in my class laughed at me. For some reason, it was turned into a wall scroll and it decorates the wall of the Japanese-style living room in my thatch-roof house to this day. The Zashiki Warashi teases me about it twice a year or so."

"…"

"*That is why I said I understand.* I was the same. I originally thought it was a natural thing to wish for. I didn't understand why my class laughed at me. But I eventually realized why. Humans cannot become Youkai. That is not the path for us."

But Yonesaki Hiro had not given up there. Even if he found it embarrassing to tell people he wanted to become a Youkai, he had remained silent and continued to wish for it in his heart. But it had slipped out occasionally. And some idiot had picked up on it and lured the boy here.

"Our differences in lifespan can't be helped. It isn't a problem we can solve. Rhinoceros beetles die sooner than we do. That's sad. But what would happen if we forced a rhinoceros beetle to live for 100 years? I have no idea how a rhinoceros beetle would feel about it, but I would guess it would be painful. *The construction of its body would have become something that can no longer be called a rhinoceros beetle.*"

Compared to the time when it was said humans lived for 50 years, our lifespans had expanded quite a bit. But it was still impossible to match a Youkai.

Humans could not become Youkai.

No matter how close we lived with them, we were still different.

"Why?"

Yonesaki Hiro asked a short question. It was a question of denial.

Did this prove he was still trapped by the criminal's trick?

Or did it mean his original wish had simply been that great?

"Why did you give up? What made you say you can't become a Youkai?"

"Because I don't need to be one," I said immediately and decisively. "For the sake of argument, say there is a child with a serious illness. A tactless doctor announces that he has only a few months left to live. Is it wrong for this child to want to make new friends?"

"Well…"

"Of course not. The length of people's lives does not bind them. Even if you have only a week to live or if you only have a day to live, it is best to live your life to the fullest up to the very last moment. Am I wrong?" I then started from the opposite angle. "Just because Youkai live so much longer than a human who lives for only 100 years, the human does not need to feel inferior. If a Youkai said it did not want to be friends with a human because he only lives for 100 years, that is just that one Youkai's issue. Would you really want to be friends with someone like that? …The Umbrella and Lantern who have always been with you are not that rude, are they?"

Yonesaki Hiro gave a large shake of his head.

And so I continued on to my conclusion.

"Then there is nothing to worry about .You just have to live your 100 years of life to their fullest. There is no need for you to throw away the life you have to have a Shichinin Misaki turn you into a Youkai. Right?"

"Is that…really true?"

"If you're worried, don't keep it to yourself. You can discuss it with the Umbrella and Lantern. As long as you aren't speaking with a horrible contrarian of a Zashiki Warashi, they will give you a proper answer."

Despite the pouring rain, they had been searching the near-overflowing flood control reservoir for the boy.

Once they learned he planned to become one of the drowning victims, they might seriously scold him. But I felt it was not my job to scold the boy. That was the job of those who had always been by Yonesaki Hiro's side.

In that case…

"You do not need the help of the Shichinin Misaki. Okay?"

"…Okay."

"Then just wait here. I'll go call the Umbrella and Lantern."

I felt a horrible feeling run down my spine.

Now that he had given up on his plan, if Yonesaki Hiro simply headed home and was reunited with the Umbrella Obake and the Lantern Obake…*he would not receive a happy ending.*

A human who met a Shichinin Misaki would die.

They were not frightening because of their razor sharp claws or fangs. They were not frightening because they were covered in powerful muscles.

If you merely met them, you would die.

It did not even need to touch you.

Yonesaki Hiro had said he met that sort of deadly Youkai. If that was the case, he was no exception. Yonesaki Hiro would die. I did not know if it would be three days later, a month later, or what, but he would certainly die now that he had met it. That was simply the type of Youkai it was.

However, there was a single small piece of fortune.

That Shichinin Misaki seemed to be part of a Package created by a third party.

It seemed the limit of only seven drowning victims at a time had been removed so the drowning victims could be added on infinitely.

I had no idea what number Yonesaki Hiro had been set as.

But if he was not in the normal count of seven, it was possible the count could be returned to zero if the core of the modified Shichinin Misaki was destroyed and it returned to its normal state.

In other words…

It was possible Yonesaki Hiro's death could be cancelled.

To properly return Yonesaki Hiro to live on in the world he had come from, something had to be done about the Shichinin Misaki at the base of it all.

But on the other hand…

Taking action to save Yonesaki Hiro would mean directly facing that Shichinin Misaki with that horrible characteristic.

If I met it, I would die.

Even if it never touched me, it would kill me.

Luckily, I had not yet encountered the Shichinin Misaki. If the Package was only targeting Yonesaki Hiro, I might be able to avoid ever encountering it. But to save Yonesaki Hiro from the Package, the risk of spotting the Shichinin Misaki rose. Knowing that, was it really best for me to continue on through the mud? I would be lying if I said that worry never crossed my mind.

I was not a card battling Onmyouji living in the modern age nor was I an exorcist who wielded spiritual power.

I was a mere high school student.

If I was to appear in this sort of story, I was only suited to play the victim.

If I didn't want to die, I needed to flee right that instant. The Shichinin Misaki problem was focused on Yonesaki Hiro, so I would be safe if I kept away from the boy. I could wait for the problem to go away.

But…

"What is it?"

"Nothing," I said as I shook my head.

Surviving like that was taking the easy way out. But someone’s life was on the line. If I took the easy way out, I felt I would be bound by that decision for the rest of my life.

It’s a bit embarrassing for me to admit, but if I could have easily made that decision, I would not have rushed out into the rain to search the flood control reservoir in the first place.

“Listen. You need to stay here. I’ll bring the Umbrella and Lantern here. We’ll deal with the Shichinin Misaki, so you stay here. Understand?”

Something had released the limit of seven people.

Something was not allowing it to count to seven.

I already had a decent guess as to what that was. There had been a strange small shabby hut set up in the old unused paddy field. A six-shot revolver toy had been kept inside. Its framework was built around the number six, so naturally *it could never count to seven.* Just as the six-shot cylinder would spin every time the trigger was pulled, the Shichinin Misaki would forever continue gathering drowning victims in vain.

When I thought back, I remembered that Yonesaki Hiro had first spoken to me the instant I touched the toy handgun.

Yonesaki Hiro may have been there all along, but I had not noticed him until I touched a portion of the Package. Was it possible the “change” in Yonesaki Hiro had simply advanced that far?

“…”

The fact that the revolver was enshrined in the small shabby hut held meaning.

If I tried to forcibly move it, someone who wanted to maintain the Package would likely try to stop me.

And they would likely do so by wielding the power of the Shichinin Misaki they controlled.

Once my death was decided, I would be able to move the danger away from Yonesaki Hiro who remained behind.

But that alone was not enough.

The Shichinin Misaki was an ocean Youkai. It made no sense for it to be in Noukotsu Village which was surrounded by forests and mountains. Some other trick would be needed to force it past all that. If I did not destroy that other trick, the Shichinin Misaki would remain in the village. It would wield its power and kill both Yonesaki Hiro and me.

"Hey, you said you met the Shichinin Misaki, right?"

"Yes."

"Did you see anything on the ground around it? Like a thermos or a plastic drink bottle. Some kind of sealed container *filled with ocean water*."

"…I don't know," said Yonesaki Hiro slowly as if trying to remember. "But I stopped by our secret base before coming here."

"In the flood control reservoir? That whole area was submerged once it began to rain."

"Yes. There was a lot of stuff there because we all gather the things we find. I remember seeing a case that probably held fishing equipment and *a cooler for putting fish in*."

"…I see."

If someone was trying to hide something or keep it from being messed with, the best method would be to place it at the bottom of that violent water. That water that had been made so muddy by the downpour. No one could see the bottom and entering the water would be suicide.

But that was likely where the Shichinin Misaki's core lay.

If I could open the sealed container and pour out the ocean water contained within, the Shichinin Misaki would likely lose all its power. Even the most powerful shark in the ocean would be powerless when dragged up on land.

I had no time.

The "change" to Yonesaki Hiro was likely progressing at that very moment.

I had to change the Shichinin Misaki's target before it crossed a certain line.

The small hut contained a silver revolver toy.

The moment I grabbed it, I would begin a deadly game of tag with a Youkai that would kill me if I so much as met it.

I had passed out on the way here, but I figured I was at most 200 to 300 meters away from the flood control reservoir the Umbrella and Lantern were at. Any more and I would have drowned.

The old unused paddy field was surrounded by wooden planks, but a careful observation showed that one of the planks was broken. I could leave through there.

The conditions I needed were all set.

The cards were still stacked too far against me to call it a fair fight, but nothing would be resolved if I did not break free of this.

Okay.

Are you ready?

Part 10

I grabbed the toy revolver in the Stevenson screen-like hut. I then began running as quickly as I could. However, the dirt of the old unused paddy field had soaked up a lot of water. I could not run like normal. Nevertheless, I somehow made it to the opening in the wooden planks surrounding the area.

In the next instant, I felt something cold run down my spine. It felt more like static than a chill. The signals running through my nerves had clearly grown buggy. I could feel the core of my body growing limp. Despite the darkness, I was blinded as if by a bright light. My breathing grew erratic. I was sweating profusely.

“Is this…something like…a fever…!?”

Dammit.

It was hard enough to run already!!

In this state, I could see how someone could drown even in a puddle. I practically fell out of the old paddy field and through the broken plank. I approached the mountain slope as I ran along an unpaved farm road. Or rather, I tried to run. It was only a distance of 200 to 300 meters, yet I seemed unable to reach my destination. If I was truly running, I would have passed my destination long ago.

All I could manage was walking while staggering.

I decided that was better than collapsing and being forced to crawl.

“Gah…pant…pant…pant…”

The pain in my throat was the worst of all. Was that because this was a deadly Youkai that created drowning victims? I did not have the courage to look behind me. I did not know what form this Shichinin Misaki modified by the Package would have, but I knew I would be overwhelmed if I looked straight at it.

Of course, whether I turned to face it or not made little difference. I had still met it, so I would die either way.

But I could not bear any more fear.

And where was I? How far had I gotten? I had lost track of the direction. Even my sense of up and down grew uncertain. My consciousness was so hazy that both my thoughts and my emotions had grown dull. I sincerely hoped I was not simply running in circles.

And then I spotted a sign.

It was a single light visible in the darkness.

It was the light of the Lantern Obake who was still flying around the flood control reservoir.

“Wh-what happened!? I heard you were sucked into a water pipe!!”

The Lantern made much more of a fuss than necessary when I finally returned to the edge of the reservoir.

But I did not have time to answer her questions.

I had to search the bottom of that unbelievably large reservoir and find the cooler filled with ocean water.

“Gyaaah!! Wh-what are you doing!? Are you trying to kill yourself!?”

Strength left my body and I more or less collapsed forward into the reservoir.

But I was in no state to search for something.

The water was about a meter deep. Logically thinking, it was shallow enough to stand in. But the current was so strong that my feet were swept out from under me and my head was forcibly dragged underwater. I could barely keep my head above water, much less move around the flood control reservoir searching for something.

“Hey! What are you doing!?”

I heard an odd voice and then saw something long and narrow stick into the water in front of me.

It was the Umbrella Obake.

“Grab on. I can act as a float!!”

"Th-thank-…bgh!? Wait a second. Why are you sinking!?"

"Don't ask m-…mghmghgh."

This Youkai is useless through and through!!

As I half-floated and half-sank in the muddy water, my body was swept in a single direction. I looked over and panicked. I was headed straight for the tunnel I had been sucked into before.

If I was sucked into it again, I would lose any chance of turning this around.

I would either run out of strength in the old unused paddy field after leaving the tunnel or I would drown in the tunnel.

I knew that, but I could think of nothing I could do to stop it.

There was nothing I could do to resist and both Yonesaki Hiro and I would be swallowed up by that deadly Youkai.

But then…

"…?"

I felt something hard against my leg.

When I thought about it, it made sense. The water was all flowing in that one direction, so all of the trash in the flood control reservoir would gather there.

And that included the cooler I was looking for.

"Lantern!! Cough, light up this area!!"

"Eh? Wh-why?"

"Just do it!!"

I gave up fighting the current and let go of the Umbrella I was using as a float. I then held my breath and dived underwater. I heard a splashing noise, but that was it. I could not count on seeing through the water when it was so muddy on such a dark night.

Even so, I managed to find a hard object by touch, grabbed it with both hands, and lifted it above the water.

The first object I found was a plastic bucket.

The second was a broken vacuum cleaner.

The third was the cooler box in question.

"Heh."

I could feel something deep in my head distorting. The Shichinin Misaki's attack may have grown stronger. But it was too late. I released the latch and forcibly opened the lid.

I then dumped the contents into the muddy water.

Nothing but a clear liquid that smelled of the beach poured out.

But that resolved it.

And as proof…

"…"

I looked around once more. I was now calm enough to simply look around. My mind had grown clear. The fever-like symptoms had disappeared.

And…

I finally noticed the Youkai approaching me from behind. The Shichinin Misaki. That deadly Youkai always made up of seven drowning victims. I saw a woman in a swimsuit, a woman in a suit with a tight skirt, a girl in a dress, and others. All of their arms were within a meter of reaching me.

But that was as far as they made it.

Countless fingers were pointed towards me like blades, but they stopped moving and approached no further.

It was as if something was interfering with their ability to act.

"You're just like a fish that's been dragged up on land," I spat out.

I received no response. Perhaps the Youkai could not respond.

"A Youkai can't be killed by normal means, but what about now? Will you be crushed by the environment and annihilated or will you be stuck here unable to die and experiencing never-ending torture?”

Very faintly…

I distinctly felt something like fear running through that deadly group.

“On that note…”

I pulled a keychain out of my pants pocket.

My family’s Zashiki Warashi bought so much pointless crap online that she had earned enough points to be sent this useless present.

The keychain was decorated with a clear sphere about the size of a ping pong ball. *And it was filled with ocean water.*

“I’ll give you a place to hide for now. I just need to stuff this in a sleeping bag so no one ‘meets’ you and then carry it to the ocean. But that is only if Yonesaki Hiro and I remain safe. Do you understand?”

Part 11

I may have looked cool bringing all that to a conclusion, but the massive flow of water created by the flood control reservoir was still sucking me towards the water pipe. In the end, I was swept into it once more. (The Umbrella managed to spread his upper portion to catch on the edge before being swept in.) Once I arrived in the old unused paddy field again, I had to return to the reservoir with Yonesaki Hiro.

The Umbrella and Lantern charged full speed through the darkness the instant they spotted the boy.

"O-ohh!! Master, where have you been all this time!?"

"Are you unharmed!? That is wonderful!!"

I could not hear the details of their conversation from where I was, but I figured things would be fine from what I did hear. In fact, there had been nothing to worry about in the first place.

This had all been caused by someone agitating the boy's concerns to cause a negative growth.

"Shinobu."

I turned toward a voice behind me and found the glamorous Zashiki Warashi holding an umbrella. I assumed she was going to let me join her beneath it, but she frowned and took a step back when I approached.

"…Stay away from me. You smell horrible."

"Then why are you even here?"

But given how muddy I was, there was no point in worrying about the rain.

"By the way, remember that Youkai artist…Houjou was it? Do you know where he went?"

"No."

I hadn't expected her to.

When I thought back, I realized the person who had showed an interest in the *toy handgun* in the sweets shop and the person carrying *a cooler and a fishing equipment case for his art supplies* had been him.

However, I had a feeling I would not find any sign of that Houjou even if I searched all over the Intellectual Village.

Why had he used that Shichinin Misaki Package? Why had he set Yonesaki Hiro as his target? Those two issues were left a complete mystery.

I'm not a professional detective like my uncle, so I know I can't have every loose end tied up. But still…

"Sigh. Let's head home."

"Yes. By the way Shinobu, I was listening to what that boy and his Youkai have been saying."

Nnn…!?

"A-and what exactly were they talking about, indoor Youkai?"

"Something that makes me want to go laugh at that wall scroll in the Japanese-style living room again."

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

I could feel my mind going blank. The Shichinin Misaki contained in the keychain was nothing. My true natural enemy was definitely that glamorous Zashiki Warashi!!

"The length of one's life doesn't matter, hm?" muttered the Zashiki Warashi with a thin smile as I trembled. "Well, I suppose that 'answer' does sound nice."

"?"

Notes

1. ↑ Azukiarai literally means “Azuki bean washing”.
2. ↑ A shintai is an object at a Shinto shrine in which a god is said to reside.

Chapter 2: Hishigami Mai @ Copied Ill Will

Part 1

It was hot.

It was the end of August, so it really should have been a bit cooler. Not even my highly revealing outfit of a white tank top and hot pants was enough to combat the heat. And the heat of the sun seemed to increase as if to say it was just getting started. Long hair was very annoying in this kind of weather. I had it bound up, but I had a powerful urge to just cut it all off.

You couldn’t take the urban heat island effect lightly.

But I was a working member of society, so I couldn’t exactly head to Hokkaido for fun. I’ll leave what kind of society I mean to your imagination.

In a large city hardened with asphalt and concrete, no one was surprised to see a mirage after consecutive hot, sunny days. I approached a large vehicle parked below an overpass in that gray and wavering city. I then tapped lightly on its body with the back of my right hand.

Now then.

When you hear the term “RV”, how large of a vehicle do you picture in your head?

Well, I doubt many people would say “the size of a large tour bus”, but that was exactly how gigantic the one in front of me was.

Or perhaps it was more accurate to say the entire interior of a tour bus had been removed and all the devices needed to live one’s life had been installed.

“Hey, hey, Mai-san. Long time no see. Come on in.”

The front door opened automatically using compressed air and the small man in the driver’s seat spoke to me. He was wearing the stereotypical indoor outfit of a T-shirt and shorts. Thanks to solar panels and a giant battery, the vehicle had the air conditioning on 24/7, so it should have been cool enough regardless.

I walked up the three or four steps into the vehicle and looked around.

It had a bed, a table, a couch, a refrigerator, a microwave, and a TV. Oh, and a gas stovetop, oven, and bathroom as well. The amount of furniture had increased since the last time I had been there. Why did an RV have a washer and dryer in it?

“You’re insane to spend 30 million yen on this thing.”

“Didn’t you know, Mai-san? There’s an asteroid coming. It’s going to get real close real soon. If you think of yourself as the earth, it’s going to pass right in front of your nose. It’ll be quite the spectacle. If you truly hope to survive, you’ll need more than some emergency food and flashlights. I’ve spent all this money to save my own life.”

That may be the case, but you’re forgetting the scale of the earth and the asteroid. Even scraping right by my nose is farther away than Japan is from Brazil.

The small man’s nostrils flared as he said, “Really, it comes down to food. Food is most important. In the cargo space down below, I’ve made a baby leaf factory using ultraviolet lights and a moisture circulation device. It’s a masterpiece! Every week, I have a drum-full of leaves to eat. I’ll never starve. I can survive for 100 years without issue using this system.”

“Only a rabbit could survive off of that.”

“You’d think so, right? But you’re wrong. Chickens. I’m raising chickens, too. They lay eggs every day, so I have no shortage of animal protein. Plus, I can eat their meat too. As long as I plan it out so I don’t eat too much chicken meat and allow a tenth of the eggs to hatch into chicks, I’ll have no problems! Amazing, isn’t it? Isn’t my system just plain amazing!?”

He was an annoying man.

But the fact that someone with such a horrible lack of sociability could survive as a free agent without relying on the power of an organization showed just how skilled he was at his job.

To switch the flow of the conversation, I said, “Now then, Supplier.”

“What is it, Mai-san?”

“I need money. Either hand over all of your money or introduce me to a job."

Those who did not understand my situation would often refer to me as the Deadly Dragon Princess of Hyakki Yakou, but I was actually a free agent just like this man. Hyakki Yakou was my usual client because it was Japan's largest organization in my field, but I did not exclusively take jobs from them.

I did like the young lady at the top of that organization, but I had to accept jobs from elsewhere to maintain the proper balance. Otherwise, I risked binding myself too closely to the one organization.

Leaving clear signs of your neutrality could be a real pain in the ass.

The Supplier was aware of those issues, so he replied without showing any real change to his expression.

"I see. Then I have a good one for you. How about taking a trip to Kyoto?"

"Kyoto?"

"Yes, Kyoto. One of the few cities of over a million where humans coexist with Youkai thanks to thoroughly maintaining the environment. I have an order asking for someone to go crush some idiots who are acting in secret there."

Oh?

As the Supplier had said, Kyoto was a unique place in both Japan and perhaps even worldwide. But the one problem with sticking to the old ways too much was an inability to deal with modern circumstances and social problems.

That city contained a large number of Youkai and a large number of humans.

In other words, it was filled with easy marks for Youkai-related Packages.

"Well, anything's fine by me. Who are these idiots?"

"Akki Rasetsu[1]."

"That organization numbers in the thousands. Isn't that a little much for me to slaughter on my own?"

“That isn’t something I want to hear from the princess who caused enough infighting to destroy Inga Ouhou[2] which was three times the size.” The Supplier grinned. “Also, you don’t need to completely annihilate them. Akki Rasetsu is earning quite a bit of hatred in their attempts to expand their range of business. If you give them a good blow or two and destroy their income cycle, those around them will finish them off.”

“And is that cycle in Kyoto?”

“It seems they’ve started some huge project. This project shows no concern for morals or human life yet they’ve started it in the middle of a city of over a million. The leaders of Akki Rasetsu will gather to inspect the project soon. That is when you should crush them.”

“Have they bet the fate of the organization on this?”

“Seems that way. Crushing either the leaders or project will be enough to fulfill the order. Of course, you’ll get a special bonus if you crush both. Will you take it?”

“I might as well. I assume you have confirmed the client’s ability to pay.”

“Yes. If I didn’t check, you and the others would track down the identity of the client.”

“Then I’ll take the job.”

“One warning,” said the Supplier. “It seems this job is a race to the finish. I discovered this while making sure the client would be able to pay. It seems middlemen besides me have been given this order as well. If you don’t get there first, you might not get paid.”

“That contradicts what you said.”

“If that happens, take it up with them. It has nothing to do with me. You can always get pissed, attack the client’s mansion in the middle of the night, and break through the door of their vault.”

“I see.” I thought for a bit. “I suppose if I find any other free agents like me in Kyoto, I’ll crush them too. If I spot them on the battlefield, I have no real reason to let them live.”

“…It’s times like this that I’m damn glad I’m on your side, Mai-san.”

Oh?

When did I ever say I was on your side?

“I’ll be going then. Don’t count on a souvenir.”

I waved my hand and headed for the exit of that end of the century RV made from a tour bus.

But then the Supplier said, “Is a job really all you need? If necessary, I can prepare you some Buddhist equipment or sacred treasures.”

“I don’t like that sort of thing. Perhaps it’s because *I’ve spent more money than this bus cost on my own skin.*”

“Really? That’s too bad. I have some good bargains like some sacred sake from the Jinnai Brewery. It was originally meant to be dedicated at the Ise Grand Shrine. It has yet to be given the color of a specific god, so it has quite a few uses.”

“I’d rather drink that than use it as a weapon.”

Part 2

And so I boarded a bullet train and headed to Kyoto. A linear motor train ran along the same route, but I did not want to deal with the grand opening fair. In my business, the convenient transportation methods that had declined in use were best.

I had a mid-sized inn in Gion lined up for temporary lodging.

But there was something I had to do before switching from the ZR Kyoto Station to the subway station.

“Suuuneeekooosuuuriii-chaaan☆ What the hell are you doing here?”

“E-eeeeeeee!? Y-you already spotted me tailing you!? Ah…no…I mean…!!”

A small canine Youkai called a Sunekosuri had his entire body twitching.

He was a cute species of Youkai that could do nothing but rub up against people’s legs, but he was still an official member of Hyakki Yakou.

Which meant…

“Well, I have to catch a train, so come with me. We can continue talking on the subway.”

“U-um, you aren’t mad?”

“Prepare yourself for tonight. We’re going to have fun in the mixed bath.”

We boarded a subway train and headed for Gion.

I asked the Sunekosuri about the situation while on the train.

“Since a member of Hyakki Yakou is tailing me, can I assume this order comes from them?”

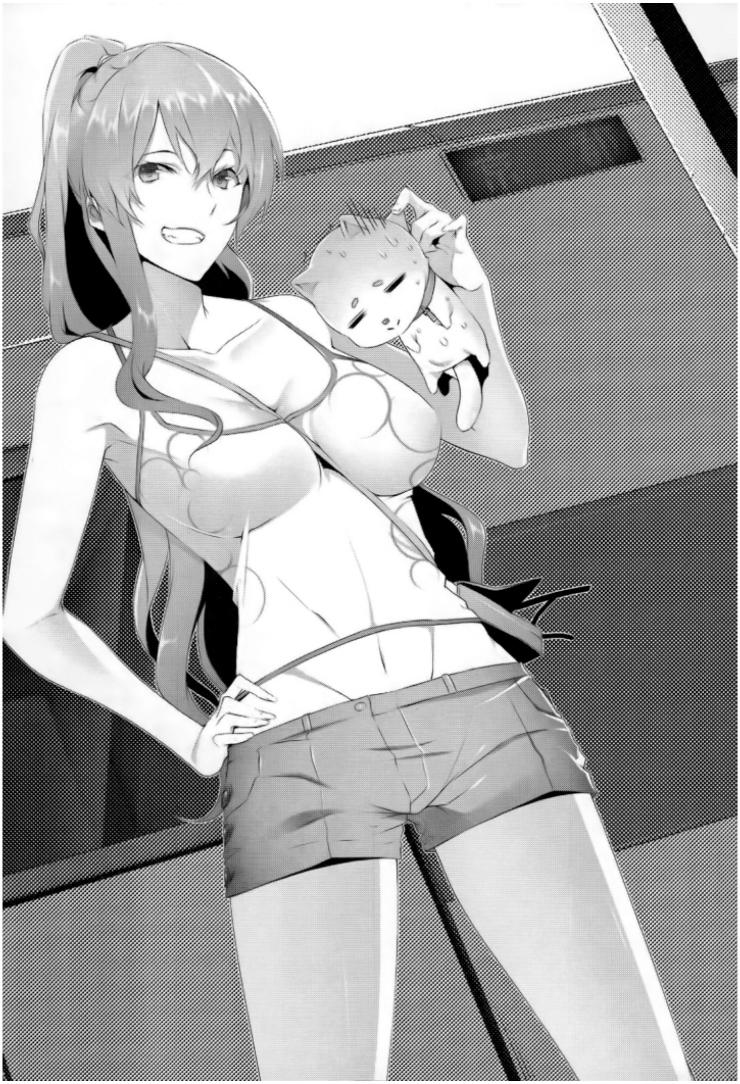
“Uuh…”

“Akki Rasetsu is an eyesore, but that is not enough justification to crush them. If Hyakki Yakou tried to force that through as a reason to attack, they would be attacked and criticized in turn. That is why they went through free agent middlemen to crush Akki Rasetsu without anyone knowing Hyakki Yakou was involved.”

But…

I leaned up against the train wall.

“I assume the young lady at the top of Hyakki Yakou disapproved of this method. She does not punish based on suspicion. If she did not have enough evidence to punish an evil, she would have a thorough search carried out. And if that was not enough but the evil needed to be defeated nonetheless, she would battle that evil honestly no matter how much blame it brought on her. That young lady prefers pure and immature methods like that. So what idiot is naming himself as a representative for Hyakki Yakou? I assume it is one of her aides who act like her regents or educators or something.”



“Ah wah wah wah wah wah,” said the flustered Sunekosuri.

But that canine Youkai was like a salaryman member of the organization, so blaming him would get me nowhere.

Whatever idiot was behind this had been the one to set it up so the payment was first come first serve and so the free agents would start killing each other. I would need to make an extra stop to “punish” that idiot afterwards.

Meanwhile, the train arrived at the Gion subway station.

The Sunekosuri and I stepped out onto the subway platform, passed through the automatic turnstile, climbed the stairs, and exited into the city.

“Wow. This is like an explosion of Kyoto.”

The administrative district in which the ZR Kyoto Station was located was lined with modern buildings, but the donut-shaped urban area not far away was completely cut off from the flow of time. The height and color of the buildings were restricted and it was filled with nothing but old wooden buildings. The roads were not paved and cars and bikes were banned from anywhere but the main roads. Police officers riding horses and rickshaws carrying tourists were a common sight.

“You can tell immediately this is one of the three biggest locations for filming period dramas. It looks like the kimono renting business is booming here.”

“They also have tons of forests and thickets. This place is really crowded.”

Despite being a city of over a million, thick forests of maple trees and thickets of bamboo could be found not far from the road. This was Kyoto. Thanks to the thorough maintenance of the environment, plenty of Youkai could be found wandering around. It was quite obvious a large portion of the income in this area was from sightseeing.

“But why are the maple and ginkgo trees changing color already? It’s still the end of August.”

“The pamphlets all say Kyoto is a city dyed in red, yellow, and green, right? They have various methods to make that a reality. For this, they use some sort of technology to make the natural trees mistake the timing for changing color.”

I entered the inn I had reserved a room in under a false name and was led to my room. I checked for cameras and bugs before assembling a few tools of the trade.

“Okay, it’s about time I crushed Akki Rasetsu.”

“The job was to either put a stop to their important project or assassinate the leaders coming to inspect it. Which will you be doing?”

“I’ll decide that once I check on the situation. I’ll go with whichever is easier.” I rubbed the back of the Sunekosuri that was politely sitting on a cushion. “Now then, Sunekosuri-kun. What do you think Akki Rasetsu is trying to do in Kyoto?”

“Eh? Well, if they came to Kyoto it must be something they can only do here, right? And Kyoto is one of the prime areas for Youkai. Even Hyakki Yakou’s structure takes it into account. The guidebook said the city was designed based on the principles of feng shui. So it must be something they need that sort of environment for, right? In that case…”

“Hah hah hah.” I gave a wooden monotone laugh. “Incorrect.”

“Eh? But…”

“C’mon, Sunekosuri-kun. You think they’re in Kyoto to do something they can only do in Kyoto? That would make their conspiracy too obvious. Doing that would be as self-destructive as streaking nude in front of the National Diet Building. I don’t know what they’re planning, but Akki Rasetsu has begun a project large enough to catch Hyakki Yakou’s attention. This is important enough for them to bet their organization on and for all of the leaders to visit. In other words, this is something they do not want to be stopped no matter what. Do you really think they would choose a setup that would be so easy to see through?”

“Th-then why would Akki Rasetsu go out of their way to go to Kyoto?”

“Think about it the other way around. Kyoto is a rare city that has both over a million people and countless Youkai. Bizarre phenomena that would stand out elsewhere will get buried under everything else in this city. The best place to hide a tree is in the forest, right? Akki Rasetsu’s project probably has little to do with Kyoto itself.”

So if you are hoping for this story to have me solve the mystery while going around to all the Kyoto sightseeing spots, eating tons of delicious local food, and providing steamy fanservice scenes at a hot spring, you should give up right this instant.

But to be honest…

I really would love to be able to mix work with pleasure like that.

“D-do you know what exactly is happening here?”

“No. They’ve set this up as a labyrinth that is incomprehensible at first glance, so I have to dig deeper before I can actually learn anything,” I said offhandedly. “And so I need to think up a way of tracking down a member of Akki Rasetsu even if it’s just someone running errands. By the way, how much do you know about all this, Sunekosuri?”

“I-I am not part of the group that knows what is going on. I was simply asked to monitor the free agents to ensure none of them went beyond what Hyakki Yakou wishes. I am supposed to call in a combat member if anything happens.”

That’s about what I had expected.

With Hyakki Rasetsu and the free agents, Kyoto was currently filled with abnormal people. The standard idea that Youkai could not be killed by normal means could no longer be counted on. The question was whether the Sunekosuri understood that risk or not.

To be blunt, his odds of returning safely to Hyakki Yakou would have been much lower had I not called out to him first.

“Th-then you will be starting by pursuing some member of Akki Rasetsu operating in Kyoto? What exactly will be your first move?”

“Well,” I cracked my neck. “How about I begin by killing all of the other free agents competing for this job?”

Part 3

The Sunekosuri trembled in fear.

Nevertheless, I swung the baby-sized rock down onto the head of the man with a camera hanging from his neck. He had been simple to spot with the suspicious mannerisms only a pro could spot.

“Okay, that’s 7 of them. I’d say this is a decent attempt to make it look like a large rock fell on him from that stone wall. Not a bad job at all. People really shine when they put in enough effort to work up a sweat.”

After disguising the circumstances, I took the poor victim’s cell phone and searched for personal information. Of course, if he was in the same situation as me, he would not have acquired any important data yet, and someone with any sense would not bring any private information to this sort of workplace.

Once I was done, I returned the phone to the corpse’s pocket and the Sunekosuri spoke up in a trembling voice.

“Wh-why…Why do people like you never try to work together to defeat the evil demon king?”

“Because we are all each other’s enemies.”

Plus, I had never before seen a boss of pure, unadulterated evil.

It was our job to kill them regardless.

“Not only can I not see what Akki Rasetsu is up to here, but I have to worry about another free agent stabbing me in the side. I need to complete some basic preparations before getting down to work.”

If possible, I would have liked to kill all of them, but I did not know how many of them there were. I had taken out a decent number, so I figured it was about time to turn towards Akki Rasetsu.

“U-umm, what are you going to do now?” The Sunekosuri looked up at me. “Unlike other Intellectual villages, Kyoto is gigantic. It seems it would be considerably harder to find an organization hiding here than in a small village.”

"It's simple, it's simple. I just have to find a starting point."

"?"

I crouched down and wrapped an arm around the Sunekosuri to begin speaking privately.

I whispered, "Whether it's a giant city or a small village, the first step is to gather the phone calls and emails being sent around. The technology used isn't all that high level."

"I-I see. But wouldn't people like this encrypt their communications?"

"Of course. But would people making normal phone calls or sending normal emails use high level encryption? Think about it in reverse. The ones encrypting their communications are the first to suspect. If I start there, it shouldn't be hard to run into Akki Rasetsu. But then," I paused for a second, "Akki Rasetsu will know this. And so they will use encryption software to send decoy data all over the place. They can just use the programs for wangiri calls or spam emails to send out a whole bunch. They send out blank messages that would take hours to decrypt and have them endlessly loop through servers throughout the city."

"Then how do you distinguish the real ones from the decoys?"

"I search on foot."

I stuck my hand into the small pink handbag I was carrying over my shoulder.

The Sunekosuri must have been expecting a handgun because his entire body flinched.

"Huh? A video camera?"

"This alone isn't enough to find Akki Rasetsu within the crowds." I pressed a switch on the video camera to begin recording mode. "But when people acquire a fake name and identity, they must also prepare a new driver's license. Those driver's licenses have an IC chip in them. The IC chips give out information when brought near a certain device just like train passes at the automatic turnstiles at a subway station."

The Sunekosuri still did not seem to understand, but I was wonderfully pretty in my willingness to patiently explain it all to him.

“If you up the output of the card reader next to a convenience store register, you can check the data on all the cards around you. I have a strengthened reader in my handbag.”

“O-oh.”

“So when I approach the target, it will suck out the information from the IC chip in their driver’s license. Ones that’s data has been illegally altered will leave traces of that in the code. If I find someone with that sort of suspicious license at one of the places sending out encrypted data, I have reason to be very suspicious of that person. Then again, it’s possible some group other than Akki Rasetsu is hiding here, so I will need to do some additional investigation afterwards.”

“W-will this really lead you to them so easily?”

“The strengthened reader can only read IC chips from a range of a meter. If I use the footage from the video camera along with the time the data was sucked out, I can probably narrow my target down to about 10 people. Then I just need to investigate those people. One of them will be the man using the false identity.”

To put it simply, I would be using the video camera and strengthened reader to search out someone working in some shady business.

And so I had to wander around Kyoto.

I spent over three hours going from Gion to Kawaramachi, cutting down Shijou Street, and finally walking around the Katsura Imperial Villa.

Everywhere I went was filled with tourists.

I wonder why foreigners like dressing up as samurai so much. If a Japanese person went to Europe and were asked if they wanted to dress up as a prince, I think they would refuse.

After gathering a certain amount of data, I boarded the subway and returned to the inn.

Just to be sure, I checked for bugs upon returning and then began comparing the video footage and the card data taken from passersby.

“Here, here, here, and here too. There are a lot of suspicious people in this city.”

“A-are they all from Akki Rasetsu?”

“Characteristic traces are left in the driver’s license IC chip data. The ones with the same traces are probably all from the same organization. Let’s see, let’s see, let’s see. There are 4 patterns here.”

“Kyoto really is a city of Youkai, isn’t it?”

“Yes. And that means plenty of shady organizations gather here.”

“How are you going to find Akki Rasetsu from this?”

“I’ll look into each of the 4 patterns. Okay, this is the encrypted communications data flying around near these suspicious people. I just have to decrypt it and…boom! Found it!!”

“H-how did you do that so easily?”

“If each email or phone call took hours to encrypt, they could never get any work done. Even if the security is strict to begin with, the people on the scene will soon find ways to simplify things to make them easier to use.”

Normally, this kind of simplified encrypted data would have numerical traps woven in that could never be solved such as pi. I had no idea how skilled these groups were, but the organizations based in Kyoto tended to do poorly when it came to intelligence issues.

I sifted through the data based on what I had found.

“Pattern 1 is a small revenge-for-hire group, Pattern 2 is *a large criminal organization* selling weapons, and Pattern 3 is an Urashima group that wishes to be taken to paradise.”

“So is it Pattern 4?”

“Yes, that’s Akki Rasetsu.”

I double-checked the faces of the people I had picked up with my video camera and compared them to the fake names and photos from the driver's licenses. I then checked the lodging information at the inn to see if any rooms were rented out under those names.

Then all I had to do was cast my net across the inn's phone lines and any nearby Wi-Fi routers to easily gather Akki Rasetsu's encrypted communications data.

I headed out to take care of that work and returned to my room once I was done.

"Oh. I already found something."

"Did you already find data related to Akki Rasetsu's headquarters or the details of their project?"

"It's nothing that great. These are just subcontractors, so they might not have been told all any of those details."

As I spoke, I compiled the fragmentary information I had acquired from multiple phone calls and emails.

"It seems they are secretly monitoring a girl by the name of Amemura Ryuu. She's clearly involved somehow with Akki Rasetsu's project."

"Do you know who this Amemura Ryuu girl is?"

"I'm checking on that now." It was all going so well I felt like whistling. "She lives in Kyoto. She's 11 years old. She's female. She attends a local elementary school and her grades are above average. She has violin lessons on Wednesdays and dance lessons on Mondays and Fridays. No records of serious illness. She has slight atopic allergies and has issues with ticks. She has received the flu vaccine this year. She has a filling in one of her right back teeth from a cavity treatment. Her father is a stay at home dad and her mother is the secretary for the president of an assembly of small- to mid-sized corporations known as the United Hive. Her personality is shy and reserved but very curious. She has to think about it for a moment before agreeing to be someone's friend."

"H-how did you find all that information?"

"The residence registry, electronic medical records, and school grade reports are all kept in the cloud. If you have decent skills, you can gather all that information as easily as surfing the net."

But that meant I had no way of determining things handled directly such as the amount of allowance she received.

“And this beloved daughter has a child’s cell phone with an alarm function. …GPS functionality can be both good and bad. If you steal the identification code, someone like me can determine her location.”

“…Wow.”

“Okay, let’s go make friends with Amemura Ryuu-chan who seems to be deeply related to this project.”

I left the inn and walked through the cityscape that seemed to turn the idea of Japan into nothing but a tourist attraction.

The foreigners in kimonos and ninja outfits stood out like sore thumbs as I walked along the unpaved road. I walked slowly and casually through the streets while obeying the traffic lights that were made to be quickly removed when a period drama was being filmed.

“But why has this Amemura Ryuu girl been marked by these shady people?”

“That is what we’re trying to find out. Youkai that only children can see are quite popular, so it might be related to that.”

But it seemed a bit odd that they had not abducted her if she was so deeply related to the project.

“Um, how are you going to approach her? She is a small child. She will probably treat adults like us as outsiders.”

“I have an idea. …But come to think of it, Sunekosuri, you could probably just run up to her given how you look.”

“Do not make fun of me! How can you say that about a dandy like me!?”

As we spoke, we approached within 50 meters of Amemura Ryuu-chan’s location. She was inside a children’s park that did not fit in with the period drama roads. Kyoto went to great lengths with its scenery, but it seemed they could not eliminate things like this and the traffic lights from before.

Just as I took one step into the park…

I felt an unpleasant feeling run down my spine. I could instinctually tell that something bad was about to happen. This was the same sort of premonition that anyone had, but oftentimes these situations were set up so it was too late by the time you felt that premonition.

“? What is it?”

“…Oh, I get it.”

The Sunekosuri was unable to understand the situation with his limited information.

Three or four children were gathered at a covered bench in the park. They were playing handheld game systems rather than on the playground equipment. I doubted kids these days would want to play out in the hot sun, so they had likely done so reluctantly to avoid their parents who always yelled at them for doing nothing but play video games.

And…

The girl named Amemura Ryuu was not among them.

However, the kid’s cell phone GPS signal was still pointing to this park.

Which meant…

“Not good! Someone swapped out the ID code of the signal!”

I did not have time to check my surroundings.

An agile kick suddenly flew at my side.

“Bfh!?”

The kick had not been intended to do damage; it had likely been meant to put pressure on my diaphragm to keep me from crying out and to knock me into a nearby thicket. Someone quickly moved to climb on top of me after I was knocked behind cover.

My hand instinctually reached for my boot.

I pulled out my small suppressor-equipped handgun.

Shit. By the time I grab this, I've 80% lost!!

As expected, the attacker swung up an arm before I could take aim with the handgun. Something long and narrow was held in that hand. I would have laughed out loud had it been a knife, but it was not. The object held between the index and middle finger was…

A magical charm!?

"…!!"

I pulled the trigger without aiming. I thought I would hit the attacker somewhere on the torso, but not even one of my three shots hit. Even at such close range, my arm was shaking too much to aim properly.

I could tell something was eating into my body.

This is…illness magic?

Illness magic!?

"Damn you. I had heard you disappeared after the coup d'etat in Hyakki Yakou, but what are you doing-…ghbgbh!?"

My mouth filled with dark red blood before I could finish speaking.

Not good. This deadly illness is beginning to spread throughout my entire body!!

This was just about the worst opponent for me. I could not defeat him in a head on fight. After all, he was the type powerful enough that the most difficult thing for him was *keeping the damage of his attacks from spreading too far.* And yet he had kicked me behind this thicket before attacking. He must not have wanted to do anything that stood out too much.

In that case…

I gathered strength in the hand holding my small suppressor-equipped handgun. However, aiming it at my attacker would do no good. As such, I held my arm out horizontally while lying on my back. I placed my arm along the ground to keep it from trembling, peered through the sight, and somehow managed to take aim.

I took aim at the forehead of the Sunekosuri nervously looking our way.

And I pulled the trigger.

“Gyahn!? By-byaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

The bullet struck the Sunekosuri in the face and he began writhing around on the ground.

He let out a scream as loud as a police car’s siren, but as a Youkai, he did not seem to have lost a single drop of blood.

“…Tch.”

That was the first I heard of the attacker’s voice.

The illness magic left my body. I stopped coughing up blood.

The attacker quickly moved away from me and tried to flee, but I used what weak strength I had left to grab his arm.

I would lose in a straight fight here, but I would never know when he might attack again if I let him go.

And so I needed to finish this. But by using some method *other than violence.*

Meanwhile, the children who had been playing handheld games approached the Sunekosuri.

“What is it? What is it?”

“Are you okay? Did someone draw eyebrows on you?”

“This isn’t a dog. I think it’s a Youkai.”

If the children saw us, we would kill them.

The Sunekosuri knew the etiquette of those like us, so he ran off in the opposite direction with tears in his eyes in order to draw the children’s attention.

Meanwhile, I spoke to the attacker.

He was one of the five most powerful official members of Hyakki Yakou.

He was the man known as the Illness Magic User.

“…Cough, cough. Were you the one who swapped out the GPS ID code?”

“What if I was?”

Thank goodness.

If he had decided to simply kill me, it would have all been over. I was truly grateful.

He was likely trying to work out if I had an ulterior motive just as I was of him.

When the gloomy Illness Magic was not wrapped around him, he could be seen wearing a black combat outfit like a SWAT member. He carried countless magic charms instead of countless magazines. He had been walking around dressed like that in Kyoto where cameras were everywhere, so it must not have seemed too strange to people. I wondered if people assumed it was some form of cosplay since this was a tourist area.

He had a muscular body and short hair that was easy to wash. However, his face was very gloomy. It made him look like he himself was wasting away due to some illness.

“So you set up this trap to hunt down anyone trying to find Amemura Ryuu. Who do you work for now? Hyakki Yakou? Or Akki Rasetsu?”

“I am a free agent.”

“So you knew the order came from Hyakki Yakou and decided to go along with the charade, is that it?”

He had sided with the rebel faction that had caused that coup d’etat because he had thought it was best for Hyakki Yakou as a whole. Even though the coup d’etat had failed, he was likely still working to help the organization.

Really now.

And he had even tried to claim he had been acting out of logic rather than emotion.

Then again, I doubted the Illness Magic User would be allowed back into the organization so easily after what he had done.

He was probably trying to indirectly obey Hyakki Yakou's orders by taking their jobs as a free agent.

He specialized in great destruction in a straight fight and he was loyal to a single organization through and through. He may have thought he was a samurai or something. He was heading down the path of the defeated samurai while I was more like a ninja, so we simply did not get along.

"So I take it your enemy is Akki Rasetsu. In that case, we have no reason to kill each other."

"That is no reason to let you live either."

"Stop it. Disposing of the body would be a pain. This has been going well so far, but that is only because those kids were so focused on their games they weren't paying attention to their surroundings. After the Sunekosuri made such a racket, do you really think you can carry a body out without them noticing? And you were the one who got those children involved, I might add."

I heard him click his tongue.

He really was the samurai type that always walked the proper path.

If it was me, I wouldn't have hesitated to kill my enemy.

"Since you set your trap around her, am I right in assuming you are trying to find Akki Rasetsu's headquarters from one of their agent's hanging around her rather than from Amemura Ryuu-chan herself?"

"Someone who looks like me approaching a child would become a major incident."

I see.

So he is aware how grim he looks.

He was, after all, a pure combat-obsessed idiot who would kill thousands or even tens of thousands to carry out his mission. He would cut out any waste or gentleness from his plans. Not even a soldier from *a large criminal organization* would be able to look him in the eye, much less a child.

"However, you have found no useful information, so you've been forced to continue laying traps, right? I'd say there is no way of approaching Akki Rasetsu's project other than making contact with Amemura Ryuu-chan."

"Are you saying you can manage that?"

"I'm an expert at that. Just watch. I don't like being indebted to anyone, so I'll share my information with you just this once to make up for sparing my life here."

I reflected sunlight off the body of my cell phone to give a sign to the Sunekosuri and then I left the children's park.

Walking with the Illness Magic User would make me stand out, but I had no choice. I bought a wide-brimmed cowboy hat from a nearby souvenir shop and put it on.

"…What are you doing?"

"I'm Hatman, you idiot. Most security cameras are located above. Wearing a wide-brimmed hat like this will at least keep my face from being recorded."

The Illness Magic User's magic charms did not fall under the Swords and Firearms Control Law, so he had no reason to be afraid of police questioning. Also, that samurai would face anyone head on, so he never tried to hide who he was. But the situation seemed quite fatal to a scout and spy like myself!!

As we walked, the Sunekosuri approached while weaving between people's legs in the crowd.

Ahh, if he can head for us that directly, we must really stand out. Sob.

"H-how could you do that!? How could you suddenly shoot a person in the head with a real bullet!? That is completely unacceptable!! Woof woof!!"

"Shoot 'a person' in the head? …But you're a dog, right? Well, a canine Youkai."

"Is that really the first thing you have to say!?"

"Sorry. I'll listen to all your complaints in the inn's bath."

"Please don't! And you aren't sorry at all, are you!? Anyway, how far have things progressed?"

“Hishigami Mai-chan has leveled up! Illness Magic User-chan looks like he wants to join your party!!”

“Eh? I thought he had deserted Hyakki Yakou? Have you already made up with him?”

The instant the Sunekosuri asked that puzzled question, the Illness Magic User gave him one hell of a glare. The canine Youkai cowered down and began trembling.

“C’mon, stop that. Don’t scare such a pretty Youkai.”

“You shot me in the face!!”

“Can we get to the topic at hand?” asked the Illness Magic User disinterestedly. “To approach Akki Rasetsu’s project, we must approach Amemura Ryuu. But she is a minor who views someone even 1 year older as an outsider due to the school year system. She is also quite wary. How do we approach her?”

“We just have to satisfy a few conditions. You can just relax and watch a pro at work.”

Part 4

No matter how pleasant a smile one put on or how unthreatening a voice one used, a child would be cautious of someone who spoke to them when they were alone. Trying to draw emotionally closer to the child in that state would always end in failure.

But that could be used in reverse.

That wall of caution would not function if one spoke to the child when they are not alone. This does not mean to try it when they are with their friends or other people on their same level, but when they are near someone they feel is stronger such as a parent or teacher.

And so…

I used the proper GPS signal to locate Amemura Ryuu-chan who had a large ribbon-shaped pin in her hair, wore a frilly skirt, and otherwise made me want to fall in love with her. I waited for her to begin speaking with her stay at home dad of a father who was sprinkling water in front of their row house type of home. Then I remotely switched on the alarm of her kid's cell phone.

A high-pitched buzzer began ringing, but it could not be turned off manually as I had control of the program.

"Wah!? Huh? Um…dad… It won't…"

"Let me see it, Ryuu-chan. Odd. It's supposed to stop when you press on the string's stopper."

Good, good.

I took action while they were worried about the public nuisance they were causing.

While still a short distance from where the ground was wet with the water the father had been sprinkling, I spoke to the father and daughter whose guard had been lowered.

"Oh, what's the matter? I hear an alarm going off, so were you robbed? You should probably report it."

"Ah, no, that isn't it. It seems my daughter accidentally pulled the string and now the alarm won't turn off."

"Are you not too good with electronics? Could I see it for a moment?"

I held out my hand while still at a distance and Amemura Ryuu-chan's father approached me to hand me the cell phone. I would not approach them. A child's personal space was much larger than adults realized.

But this easily resolved that problem.

I was a criminal, so this much is to be expected.

"Here, it's off. It looks like it wasn't the string but the alarm that automatically starts due to too great an impact. That's why the alarm would not stop even after putting the string back in place. You needed to open it up and stop the program."

"…I see. I should probably actually read the manual."

"That is probably a good idea as far as the emergency functions are concerned. …Here you go, young lady."

I ultimately spoke to Amemura Ryuu-chan rather than her father as I held out the phone.

She looked back and forth between me and her father's face a few times, but then…

"Ryuu-chan, say thank you."

Pushed on by her father, Amemura Ryuu-chan timidly reached out to take the phone I was holding out. Her small hand grabbed the plastic body of the phone.

Good. Primary communication complete.

I had solved a problem of hers and had been certified "safe" by someone she considered stronger than herself. I had even made physical contact between our hands in addition to the verbal contact.

It had been the same as a child timidly approaching a large pet dog at a friend's house.

She now knew it would not bite.

If she saw the dog again while walking along the street, she would not be afraid to approach it.

I smiled at the father and said, “I will be going then.”

“Oh, thank you very much.”

…No, thank you for helping me with my job.

“Goodbye to you too, young lady.”

“…Bye.”

When I waved goodbye with one hand, Amemura Ryuu-chan waved back while hiding behind her father.

That had gone well.

So well I was a bit worried about her future.

After completing my preparations there, I left the Amemura residence and met back up with my companions. When I did, both the Sunekosuri and the Illness Magic User spoke up.

“You are just like a kidnapper.”

“It scares me that you have a successful formula for that. How many times did you have to try it before perfecting that?”

Oh, come on.

My job begins with earning the trust of people regardless of sex, age, nationality, or religion. It isn’t like I specialize in children.

“Now then, tomorrow I will make contact with Amemura Ryuu-chan herself outside of the home. I wasn’t able to give her my name, so I want to act before she forgets me. Illness Magic User, you defeated a few members of Akki Rasetsu to gather information, right? Is there anything particular I should ask about?”

“Her family’s past.”

“You think this might be related to an Inugami or other Youkai that resides in a bloodline? Wouldn't it be faster to search out a family tree?"

"I researched her bloodline, but found nothing suspicious. Or rather, nothing more than the small things you can find if you follow any family tree back far enough. She lacked anything decisive. I am hoping for something else related to the fate of the family."

"The fate of the family?"

"I am wondering if anything special happened to the family in the past such as in the Rokubu Goroshi story."

While some Youkai were referred to as "residing in the bloodline", it did not mean the bloodline itself possessed a special base sequence. It was simply that good or evil fates earned by past actions had a tendency to stick with a bloodline. The direct bloodline between parent and child was the simplest link.

However, that kind of fate could be passed on to people not related by blood such as between a master and servant samurai, monks training at the same temple, or people who entered a forbidden zone during a test of courage. If one focused too much on bloodlines, one could receive a negative influence from an unexpected route, so it was best to be careful.

At any rate…

"If that's what this is about, I'm not sure we would learn anything from the girl. It might be faster to trick the information out of the father."

"Then do that if necessary."

"Fine, fine. Oh, right. Illness Magic User, can you handle electronics? You managed to mess with Amemura Ryuu-chan's GPS, right?"

"Well enough."

"Then you investigate the mother while I go with the daughter. You would just have to wait for me to produce results otherwise, right?"

"The mother?" asked the Sunekosuri in confusion.

I nodded and said, “To be honest, there is no way to look into the father as he’s a stay at home dad. But the mother brings in the money for the Amemura household, so she’ll definitely leave data behind in her job. You can look into that.”

“She works as the secretary for the president of United Hive, correct? If I recall, her name is Tenkyuu. I did a basic investigation, but I found no data that seemed related to Youkai.”

“Dig deeper. She works for United Hive. They gathered together the small- to mid-sized factories that support Japan’s cutting edge technology, created a centralized structure for those factories’ patents, and make tons of money as a point of contact for them with influence as a single giant entity on the level of the biggest corporations in the world. They deal with tons of patents, so their digital defenses will be greater than average. There’s definitely something below the surface.”

“Understood. I will keep at it until I at least find some secret account files.”

Now then.

With our general plans set, I had nothing left to do that day.

I had worked up quite a sweat on the first day, so I decided to have some fun in the open-air bath with the lovely Sunekosuri-chan.

Part 5

The next day, I killed time in the inn with the Sunekosuri until evening. The Sunekosuri's eyes opened wide when he saw the overall extravagant food, but it seemed the food was not made from Intellectual Village ingredients. Then again, a traditional Japanese meal where everything from the water to the rice was produced in Intellectual Villages would likely cost 2 million yen a person.

It was a bit strange how the Japanese could not afford to eat what was the pride of Japan.

It may have been used as a means of acquiring foreign currencies.

"Sunekosuri, it's about time we headed out. Let's begin our attack on Amemura Ryuu-chan."

"Eh? You know she's going to leave her house? But this is the middle of summer break."

"She has her extracurricular lessons year round. She lives in a scenery protection zone where cars are banned from entry, so her father is unlikely to take her to and from those lessons. And even if he does, I can create an excuse to separate them."

We once more walked through the streets of Kyoto that looked straight out of a period drama. I knew where Amemura Ryuu-chan's lessons were held, so I headed there. To disguise myself as a tourist, I peered into souvenir shops, ate dango while embracing the Sunekosuri, and had even more fun with the Sunekosuri while heading to our destination.

Then my decoy cell phone rang.

The call was from the Illness Magic User I had exchanged numbers with the day before.

"I have found information related to Tenkyuu at United Hive."

"Okay, okay."

"United Hive is a collection of small- to mid-sized factories in Kansai that even create industrial technologies related to satellites, right?" asked the Sunekosuri. "I've heard they have successfully negotiated to use a foreign country's launch site to launch small satellites made with their own independent technology."

"At first glance, that appears to be going well, but they are having problems behind the scenes," explained the Illness Magic User. "Their business related to the satellite itself has been a success, but they were badly burned when they tried to go further and create their own rocket technology. It seems a powerful rival group has interfered by claiming they plan to use the rockets as missiles."

"But Amemura Ryuu-chan's mother is only the president's secretary right? If she ends her contract and distances herself, she does not need to worry going down with them. She technically works for an employment agency, so it doesn't matter to her if the company with her contract fails. If she is skilled, she should be able to find a new job easily enough."

"I do not know if it was in hopes of making money or if she wanted to gain the favor of the president, but it seems Tenkyuu bought the corporation's stock in addition to her normal secretary duties. Now that this other group is interfering with the development of the rocket engine, she is in trouble. …Simply put, the Amemura family is in a lot of debt."

"And that's where Akki Rasetsu comes in."

"Eh? So is the Amemura family working with Akki Rasetsu?" asked the Sunekosuri.

"They may not know the details of the project, but they likely know they're doing something," I replied. "They probably do realize they are helping assemble a Youkai-related Package, though."

They likely felt it was on the level of stealing credit card information.

But unfortunately for them…

The scope of the Package had to be much greater than that for people like us to be sent in.

"Well, I had a feeling there was more to this since the Amemura family had not been abducted despite being deeply related to the project."

"It would be simpler to abduct them than to approach them to make a deal. Why would they do it this way?" asked the Illness Magic User.

"Because they wanted to finish this quietly. That's also why they came to Kyoto to hide a tree in the forest." I turned towards the Sunekosuri who was the representative of Hyakki Yakou who we were truly working for. "By the way, do you think slaughtering the Amemura family would suffice to destroy Akki Rasetsu's project?"

"Y-you can't do that!! They are normal people who have nothing to do with us! If you get them involved in that way, I will directly go to my higher ups to see that you are not paid!! Woof woof!!"

"That's what I thought. We don't know what makes the Amemura family useful. If it ends up being a talent 1 in 100 people have, they could use a different candidate to continue their project. It's also possible killing the Amemura family acts as a trigger to activate the project."

In other words, it was possible they were intentionally being left alive so they could be killed at the proper time.

And that would of course be kept a secret to the Amemura family who thought they were simply helping.

"Should I search for more information related to United Hive?" asked the Illness Magic User.

"No, I doubt you would find anything more anyway. Tenkyuu does not seem directly related to the Youkai. I am about to contact Amemura Ryuu-chan, so just wait for my report."

I ended the connection and stuck my cell phone in the pocket of my hot pants before turning a corner.

At the same moment, Amemura Ryuu-chan exited a building after finishing her dance lesson.

I put on a soft smile that would leave others in my business speechless and raised a hand.

"Oh, so we meet again, young lady."

Part 6

It seemed Amemura Ryuu-chan was quite fond of the Sunekosuri. A rather large bag that likely contained her sportswear for her dance lessons hung down from her shoulder as she walked next to me and held the canine Youkai in both arms. It was a lovely image. Everything about it was cute.

Now then.

I had to use Amemura Ryuu-chan to learn what Youkai it was Akki Rasetsu was working with. The Illness Magic User seemed to think it was related to the past of the Amemura family.

I started with a casual opening question.

“By the way, have you ever done that thing?”

“?”

“Y’know, the thing at the Bon festival where you stab chopsticks into eggplants, cucumbers, and such to create animals.”

At first glance, things like that and traditions related to visiting the graves or household Buddhist altars of one’s ancestors seemed the same for every family. However, those things were actually packed full of small local rules. You could tell where someone was from just by seeing how they stood up the incense stick. Also, amateurs did not understand the importance of anything related to the occult, so they would usually tell you without hiding anything.

However…

Amemura Ryuu-chan shook her head and gave an explosive reply.

“We don’t do that at my house.”

“Oh? Do you not do that kind of thing anymore?”

“We never did it. It’s a family rule. We aren’t supposed to prepare to meet our ancestors even during the Bon festival because it will make a monk come.”

…

A monk, you say?

“But you do go visit your grandfather’s house, right?”

“Yeah. We go there to visit our family’s grave. I don’t really get it, though. I don’t know what temple the grave is at.”

“My grandfather’s house was on the beach. There would be a ton of jellyfish every year, but there was nothing to do there but swim.”

“Oh, mine too. My grandfather likes to go fishing, but I like to swim more.”

Oh, she went along with my leading comments easily enough.

So her grandfather’s house is on the beach.

Does that mean that monk she mentioned is it?

“Is your grandfather a fisherman?”

“No. He was a ferry captain. My uncle is a ship captain too.”

We had made it to the Amemura family house, so I took the Sunekosuri back from the girl and parted ways with her.

I pulled out my decoy cell phone and called the Illness Magic User.

“It’s definitely an Umibouzu[3].”

Part 7

An Umibouzu.

As the name suggests, it was a giant Youkai that appears in the sea. Most theories suggested they were created by the gathering of regretful souls in an area filled with a large number of drowning deaths in the past.

Living beings had souls, but they were difficult to handle. At the very least, they could not be easily removed such as with an organ transplant and they could not be replaced with something artificial either.

I felt the concept was a bit similar to quantum cryptography.

The mass of information definitely existed, but if someone forcibly tried to observe or touch it, it would transform into “something else”. That made it almost impossible to use or intentionally alter the information source of the soul when it was in its pure form. That was something only a god could manage.

Of course, Western demons used contracts written on parchment to remove human souls, but I don’t really know how that works. If they could perfectly control an act of god like that, I doubt they would be content simply being known as demons regardless of whether they are a pure species or if they can’t fully use that power and are looked down on by evil gods.

But I digress.

I was talking about the driving force that keeps living beings moving.

Directly interfering with it was difficult. The instant someone touched it, the information would change. However, it could still be used even after it transformed into “something else”. When those remnants gathered and took on a new form, they would create a certain type of Youkai.

One example was the Shichinin Misaki that let the oldest victim finally rest in peace once a new victim arrived.

Another was the Funa Yuurei that would sink a ship if not given a bottomless water ladle.

However, those should not be seen as having any real connection with the original human. A living fish and fish meat were two different things and a human did not gain the will of the fish upon eating fish meat. In the same way, that which became a Youkai did not care what its raw materials were.

“By the way, the Illness Magic User is an exception among exceptions. He has a single soul and is still a living human being, but he uses magical charms to give his own hateful grudges strong directionality in the form of illness magic. In our business, you need to borrow the power of a Youkai or demon to produce effects above a certain level, but he creates those curses solely with his own power. He’s quite the monster. He might be on the same level as that noble’s grudge that shook up Kyoto during the Heian period.”

Upon returning to the inn, I explained that to the Sunekosuri.

I had modified my own body, but it was still based on the power of the Shikigami known as the Deadly Dragon Princess. He was truly an oddity in his ability to produce paranormal phenomena without relying on a Youkai in any way.

“But to constantly produce enough hatred to give form to those curses, his organs must be a mess from the intense stress. When he was in Hyakki Yakou he would reduce that with the help of incense, but I wonder what he does now.”

While embracing a massager like a body pillow and vibrating slightly, the Sunekosuri stuck out his long tongue and said, “An Umibouzu, is it? From what I have heard, they are not much different from a Funa Yuurei. I have heard it is merely an issue of regional differences in what form the drowning dead take when they change.”

“More or less.”

“So this is a giant Youkai that frequently appears in areas of the sea where lots of people have drowned? So what about the area Amemura Ryuu-chan’s grandfather works in?”

“I checked it out. His house is on the coast at the northern side of Kyoto. Thirty years ago, a powerful typhoon sunk a bunch of ships there. Her grandfather was working there at the time, so that fate must have become intertwined with his own.”

Of course, you could find some sort of great disaster or accident in most areas of ocean if you went back 50 or 100 years.

“So preparing to meet their ancestors calls in the Umibouzu,” said the Sunekosuri sounding a bit downhearted while embracing the massager. “The ones who died in the accidents did nothing wrong, so it’s a sad story.”

“That’s how it is with those Youkai. The materials may be the thoughts of the dead after their souls have been transformed like a destroyed piece of quantum cryptography, but the Youkai created is something completely different from the original people. If the created Youkai is a deadly one, they will not hesitate to bare their fangs against a lover of one of the humans before death. The rules will have already been overwritten.”

What was Akki Rasetsu hoping to do with this Umibouzu?

The next thing to investigate was…

“Where is this Umibouzu?” asked the Sunekosuri. “It’s an ocean Youkai, so Amemura Ryuu-chan’s grandfather’s house or the surrounding area seems the most suspicious.”

“Wait, wait. If it just has to be ocean water, the fish tanks at a sushi restaurant might qualify. Technology has come a long way in this age. We should probably expand our search to include aquariums and ocean water pools.”

“Uuh…”

“And whatever Akki Rasetsu’s ultimate objective is, they’ve located themselves in the center of Kyoto to ‘hide a tree in the forest’.” It wouldn’t make sense for it to be so far from their headquarters. That would be the same as leaving the tree outside the forest.”

“S-so do you have any idea what area might be suspicious?”

“The dance classroom.” I raised a finger. “The exterior is made to fit the period look of the city, but the inside has a full complement of fitness facilities. And that includes an indoor pool.”

These days, dance lessons were given in PE class for elementary and middle schoolers. Kids sure had it tough. How did they see dance lessons at that age where they began seriously wondering how the standard subjects in school would help them as adults?

But something had caught my attention while watching the girl.

“Amemura Ryuu-chan had a bag while leaving the dance classroom, remember? It was too large to simply hold her dancewear. She may have had a swimsuit in there as well so she could play in the pool after her dance lesson. Faithfully attending lessons in this heat has to be tough. The dance classroom might provide that ‘free service’ to prevent children from skipping.”

“Then has someone switched the pool water with ocean water? B-but anyone would be able to tell if they tasted it. And it would sting people’s eyes.”

“Then they just have to do it with water no one will ever get in their mouth,” I replied casually. “For example, the water in the sterilization tub the kids enter up to their shoulders in before entering the pool. Anyone with any sense will keep their delicate face out of it. And even if someone does taste it by accident, they don’t know how powerful disinfectant is supposed to taste. Even if it tastes quite salty, they would probably just think that is how it must taste.”

“For most of the swimmers, that ocean water would be neither harmful nor helpful…"

“But Amemura Ryuu-chan would be different because of her family’s fate with the Umibouzu. Whenever she periodically uses the pool and enters the sterilization tub beforehand, she stimulates the Umibouzu. It’s the same as using her biometrics to open a lock restricted to a specific user. And it is all according to Akki Rasetsu’s project.”

“You said Amemura Ryuu-chan’s mother is cooperating with Akki Rasetsu to escape her debt, right? How does that tie in?”

“She probably set the days Amemura Ryuu-chan goes to her lessons and ensures that she goes to the dance classroom without skipping. And of course, they make sure the mother does not know what is truly going on. They might have another guiding agent in the dance classroom who ensures the girl always plays in the pool after the dance lesson.”

The dance classroom itself held no danger. There would be no problem if the mother told someone the days of the week her daughter went to dance lessons and no one would find it odd she made sure her daughter always went. It may have been an odd command, but the parents would have no problem if they were told to ensure their daughter was not involved by keeping her schedule the same as before.

How naïve.

If someone was paying money, they would be gaining something worth the money spent.

“So that means…”

“We need to investigate that dance classroom’s facility and instructor.”

Part 8

And so I took action in the middle of the night.

I met up with the Illness Magic User in the darkness of the night and we headed for the dance classroom's building.

The building was about the size of a gym and was three stories tall. It was still made to match the period setting in its looks, so it was almost laughable. The inside was likely crammed full of cutting edge fitness equipment.

After we circled the building to check on the situation, I tapped the Illness Magic User on the shoulder and said, "As today's guest, you need to charge in and wipe them out."

"Why do I need to do what you say?"

"You don't have to if you don't want to. But if you don't do anything here, you won't get another time to shine. It would be insulting if you asked me to split the reward 50/50 after that."

"…"

The Illness Magic User sighed, stopped hiding, and walked boldly up to the front entrance. It seemed the idea of sneaking in never even occurred to him. He kicked in the door and set foot inside the building while a home security alarm rang.

In the next instant, a deep darkness seeped out from every window in the building.

The Sunekosuri's entire body jumped slightly.

"Wah…wah wah! Wah wah wah wah wah!! I-is all of that illness magic!?"

"There's no escape for anyone inside."

An unrelated security guard might be inside too, so he would start at a level which would only knock them unconscious. But once he had checked everyone inside, he would increase it to a truly deadly illness.

That's how it was with that combat-obsessed idiot.

He practically announced that *it was harder for him to limit the damage done.*

…Now then.

"It's about time we made our move."

"Eh? But the Illness Magic User is still inside. If we go in there, we'd be caught in the middle of it."

"We're not going in," I said while circling around behind the building. "This may indeed be a base for Akki Rasetsu. But can we say for sure the entire project is contained here? Is it possible they have other bases or hideouts? Where are their VIPs? Attacking this place might not be enough to cut Akki Rasetsu's Achilles tendon."

"Th-then what are you going to do?"

"Look over there." I guided the Sunekosuri's gaze while holding him in my arms. "There it is. A large truck with a silent electric engine. A dangerous vehicle on a dark night."

"Huh? But aren't vehicles banned here in order to preserve the look of Kyoto?"

"Generally, yes. But a city of over a million can't function like that. A few vehicles are allowed an exception at specific times. Any work that would destroy the atmosphere is done in the middle of the night so no one will see it."

And Akki Rasetsu had prepared transportation in one of those.

The Illness Magic User was on a rampage within the building and it was obvious they were trying to transport something out.

"Look, look, look. The backdoor opened and they brought something out… What is that? A metal tank?"

"It's bigger than a refrigerator. It takes five of them to carry it."

"I guess they're trying to escape with the 'trick' set up in the pump room."

I had concluded they were luring Amemura Ryuu-chan into the building's indoor pool so she would touch the "ocean water" at set intervals. That would provide the proper stimulus to the “monk” that was likely a type of Umibouzu. That meant they might be transporting the small pressure tank for the sterilization tub.

In other words…

The “monk” was contained within that tank.

“What are you going to do now?” asked the Sunekosuri.

“Simply stealing that won’t bring this to an end. I want to know where they’re taking it. That will likely be Akki Rasetsu’s most important base. That tank will be joining other things they don’t want destroyed and people they don’t want killed.”

Just as everyone would head to the emergency staircase when the fire alarm rang, a sudden attack would put people on guard for simultaneous attacks from multiple direction while evacuating the most important items and people to a safe place

Which meant…

If I followed them, I would be led straight to the location in which the enemy had gathered all of their weak points.

“Th-then you are going to tail that truck?”

“That would be the normal method, but I don’t have a vehicle of my own. I’d like to attach a tracking device.”

“…It does not look like you will be able to sneak close to it. There are five men carrying the metal tank and six got out of the truck.”

“Then I’ll have to approach without sneaking,” I said offhandedly while pulling my video camera out of my handbag.

“What are you doing?”

“People working in the underworld of society don’t like to stand out. I’ll use that against them.”

I attached a random cable to the video camera, stuck the other end of the cable into my handbag, and approached the large truck.

They quickly spotted me and tried to stick a hand into their pockets, but I shouted out before they could.

“Attack☆Late Night Dinner!!”

“Eh? Ah?”

“Okay okay. Today, I’ve come all the way to Gion in Kyoto! What an age we live in. Even an amateur like me can easily *make an internet broadcast TV show* just by using i@Stream! Okay, now it’s time for the usual *live broadcast interview*!! Truck drivers like this always know the best places to eat.”

“Wait, wait!! What do you think you are doing!?” frantically protested one of the men.

Yes.

He protested peacefully.

If he pulled a handgun out here, he would be making his world debut holding it.

“You have to ask? This is a net show. *It’s broadcast live worldwide.* My equipment is a bit small though because my budget isn’t very big.”

“No, wait. We are…um…in the middle of work right now. We aren’t allowed to do this kind of thing. Surely even you are banned from working a different job while at work. So…”

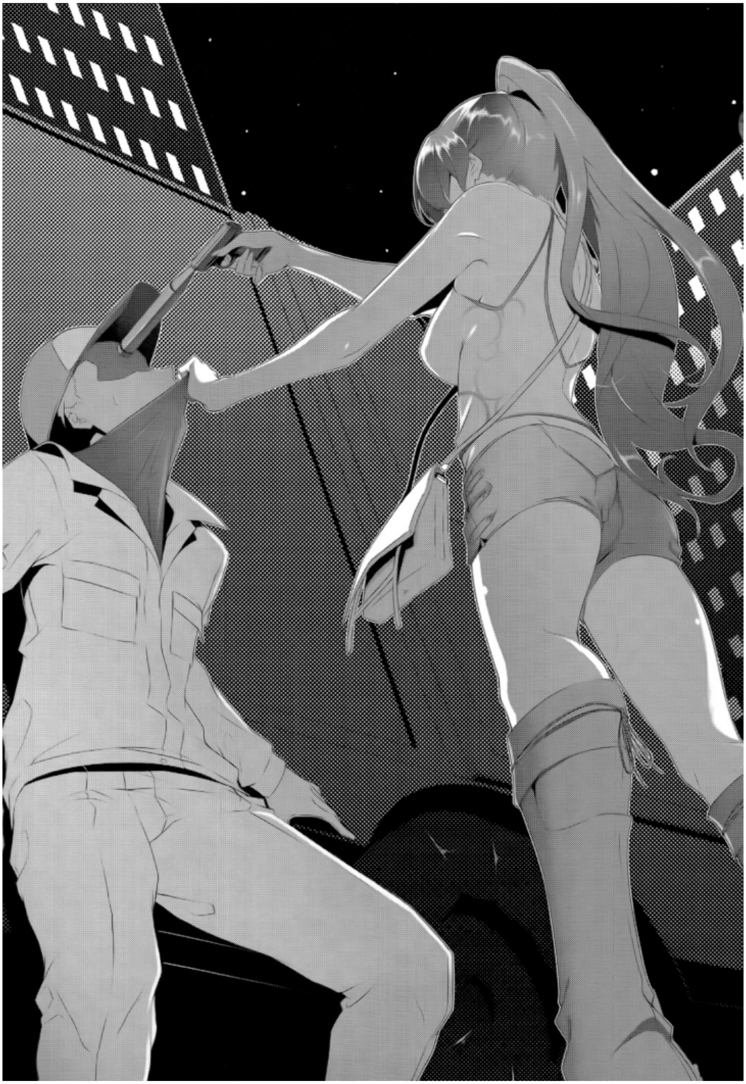
“Okay, thank you very much.”

After approaching close enough, I tossed aside the video camera and grabbed the man’s arm. I then twisted his elbow around and upwards, swiped a suppressor-equipped handgun from within the man’s shirt, and killed all of his Akki Rasetsu comrades with it.

Oh, that was louder than I expected.

The nightmare lasted only 5 seconds.

When caught by surprise like that, all they could do was stand still.



“Wh-what are you-…Hot!?”

“Oh, sorry, sorry. Did I touch you with the barrel when it was hot from the gas? While I’m at it, I’ll apologize for something else, too. I lied about the worldwide broadcasting, so don’t worry.”

I grabbed the collar of the one remaining man and slammed his back against the side of the large truck.

I then pressed the barrel against his forehead.

“Now, how about you tell me everything you know? What is this? What are you doing with it?”

"Ha ha… I'm just a subcontractor. I don't know any of the details."

I thought you'd say that.

I aimed the gun lower and fired a single shot into the man's right thigh.

I of course made sure to stop up the throat I was grabbing at through his collar to keep him from crying out.

"Gh…mgh!? Cough cough!!"

"Next, I will remove the suppressor and fire it from within your hand so it leaves gunshot residue. The gunshot will make sure the nearby residents come running out. I will run off and leave the gun here. The gun that killed your comrades will remain and you cannot run off with that leg. Whether you're found guilty or not, your face will probably be on the front page of newspapers across the nation. You will make an enemy of not just Akki Rasetsu but the entire occult industry that wishes to remain hidden. Do you really think the bars of a prison cell will be enough to protect you then?"

"…I-I don't know much. I'm telling the truth about that!"

"Tell me what you know."

"Generation after generation, the Amemura family has worked as sailors. The tradition goes back as far as the Heian period. And the family has a tradition of letting the bodies of their dead wash into the ocean from their ships. They stopped doing that in recent times, but the Amemura bloodline is still strongly linked with the ocean around Kyoto."

"So this 'monk' isn't an Umibouzu?"

"Technically, we don't even know if it is a Youkai. It is closer to a vague family guardian deity. But large accidents have happened in that ocean a few times. The unrelated people who drowned there were incorporated in with their ancestors. That may have given it properties similar to an Umibouzu."

Wait.

Then what is Akki Rasetsu's true goal in stimulating this 'monk' using Amemura Ryuu-chan?

Suddenly, the building's backdoor slammed open.

"Tch!"

I tossed the man aside and fired several shots at the back door while beginning to run. Once the magazine was empty, I threw away the handgun, picked up the video camera I had dropped, and fled as quickly as I could.

Several gunshots quieted by suppressors rang out behind me.

Not good, not good, not good!!

I frantically moved my legs and leapt behind cover while the Sunekosuri approached from a different route.

"Honestly, what are you doing!?" he shouted.

"I did what I needed to do. It's time to disappear."

"Eh? But what about that truck? It's going to leave!!"

"I said I was going to attach a tracking device, remember?" I raised my index finger as the Sunekosuri froze in place. "If I had simply attached a tracking device underneath the vehicle, they would have found it right away. That is why I made the Akki Rasetsu courier think I was approaching to ask how the Amemura family is related to all this. *That was a decoy objective.* If they are satisfied to know why I was there, they will not think about looking for a tracking device. Okay?"

"Y-you…"

"Now let's lose our Akki Rasetsu pursuers without slaughtering them. I want them to think I frantically ran off after being interrupted in the middle of gathering information. Once they feel safe once more, I can return and catch them off guard."

Part 9

No matter how far you are from your target, there is nothing to be afraid of as long as you know where it is. I ran around the streets of Gion to lose the pursuers from Akki Rasetsu and then took a very roundabout route to the location indicted by the tracking device. Upon arriving, I saw a thick forest and the roof of a building.

“Found it, found it. It looks like an ancient mansion that was designated a Tangible Cultural Property.”

“It does look like something that could be on the same list as Kinkaku-ji or Ginkaku-ji.”

Not only was it a large Japanese-style estate, but it seemed to include a small forest with it. It looked like someone could become stranded within the grounds of the residence. The fact that something like this could exist in the middle of a city was why one could never underestimate Kyoto.

“It seems they have also hired exclusive firefighters in the name of keeping this precious cultural asset from being damaged. That means they have the right to temporarily hold off any requests for emergency services.”

“That would definitely be ideal for running a secret project. But is the person who owns the mansion involved with Akki Rasetsu?”

“I don’t know. Amemura Ryuu-chan’s family was dragged into it with money, so this may be the same.”

“…Debt? But this is such a large estate.”

“Which means it takes money to maintain it. Plus they will get less monetary aid as a lot needs to be done related to the Intellectual Village as well. The culture needs to be preserved, so it cannot be remodeled to be more energy efficient. Even the smallest scratch requires an expert craftsman to repair. Being designated a cultural asset can be quite a bother.”

The location of the tracking device told me the large truck had already entered the grounds.

“How are you going to sneak in? Even I can tell they have guards all over the place.”

“With this many people on one side of the grounds, there must be over 100 of them in all. But that also tells us they are protecting something important enough to warrant that.”

Movies often had scenes of attaché cases being transported while handcuffed to someone’s wrist. In reality, that would only tell everyone to attack you because you are carrying something valuable. This was the same.

I pulled out a radio.

“? Are you calling in the Illness Magic User?”

“If he learned I was using him back there, he would attack me in anger. That isn’t what I’m doing.” I shook my index finger. “Now, Sunekosuri-kun. You saw how large that truck was, right? Did they really need all that space when the metal tank was only a bit larger than a refrigerator?”

“Huh? Now that you mention it…”

“That extra space was for shock absorbing equipment. In other words, the contents of that metal tank need to be kept in a delicate state. It likely contains the ‘monk’ after it was altered with Amemura Ryuu-chan’s help.”

“And?”

“You still don’t get it? I attached a tracking device to the bottom of that truck. It would have been a waste to only attach a tracking device when I had the chance. I also added something a little more fun.”

“Y-you don’t mean…”

It seemed the Sunekosuri had caught on, so I replied with a full-faced grin.

“I do. I attached a remote-controlled bomb.”

I felt a blast resound in my gut as an orange pillar of fire burst into the air from within the estate grounds.

“I just detonated a bomb directly below that ‘monk’ that needed to be treated delicately. Whatever happens now, it isn’t going to be good for Akki Rasetsu. While the guards are focused on that, I can sneak in.”

“H-have you completely forgotten all of this is supposed to be kept hidden!? You just woke up half of Kyoto with that blast! Everyone is going to focus on this area!!”

“As I said before, the owner of an important cultural asset has powerful authority on his own land. Any nearby onlookers as well as the police and firefighters will be held back for a while. We don’t have to worry about anyone seeing us fight.”

While holding the Sunekosuri in my arms, I slipped into the ancient estate’s grounds. The area was surrounded by bamboo thickets. Static ran through my radio every once in a while. Someone was communicating within 10 meters of me. Quite a few someones in fact.

But they were not in their usual positions.

It may have been small, but a route had opened up that I could slip in unnoticed through.

I ran through the bamboo thicket while ensuring I made no noise.

Finally, the important cultural asset came into view.

“…Wow.”

Overall, it was shaped like a hollow square with one side missing. A few large buildings were connected by covered pathways. The yard was neither dirt nor grass; it was completely covered with small tightly packed stones. It even had a pond filled with koi that might have cost millions of yen each.

In a large open space in front of the main entrance, something was burning.

It must have been the large truck I had blown up.

But that was not the main problem.

Something else was illuminated by the flames.

It looked like a small elderly man. It was only about 130 cm tall. It looked like a human had been crumpled up so it was condensed into a single point.

However…

Its shadow stretched out oddly far. The effects of the flames were not enough to explain it. The shadow stretched for dozens of…no, it might have been over 100 meters. It looked as if the crumpled old man’s essence was leaking out in the form of a shadow.

“Is that…?”

“It’s the ‘monk’. But…dammit. I still don’t know what skill that Youkai has.”

People were collapsed around it. They were likely the skilled agents of Akki Rasetsu…so how had they been defeated?

“…No.”

“What is it?”

“The true form of the ‘monk’ is large enough to cast that shadow. The small old man we can see is probably the true oddity. It might be some sort of illusion or an interface for humans to contact it.”

“So this ‘monk’ is actually over 100 meters tall, but we just can’t see it?”

“It simply stepped on the annoying bugs gathered around it. What happened here is quite simple.”

But in that case, it would be hard to find a means of defeating it.

Just as an ant could not defeat a human, a human would have a hard time defeating that ‘monk’.

That didn’t mean it was impossible, though.

“Wh-what are you going to do now?”

“Getting into a fight with that thing would be pointless. I’ll move around it and enter the mansion. Akki Rasetsu’s important items and VIPs will have been evacuated to there. Wiping all of them out comes first.”

We circled around widely through the yard and to one of the outside pathways. We headed along it to sneak into one of the large buildings.

But a voice called out before we could.

It belonged to a young man.

“There’s no need for you to do that. *It’s already over.*”

“…”

I turned around and found someone standing along the connecting pathway. A man wearing a samue smiled thinly. I suddenly became intensely aware of the handgun hidden in my boot.

Not good.

When I begin relying on this, I’ve already 80% lost.

This man contained something that made me think that.

I could instinctually tell.

“What is already over?”

“You took too long, so we ended up killing the leaders of Akki Rasetsu ourselves. To tell the truth, we were hoping to get some help from the likes of you.”

“A-a-are you from Akki Rasetsu!?” asked the Sunekosuri.

“Yes? But they complained too much despite never doing anything themselves. After ending so many projects prematurely, we couldn’t help but get angry. We discussed it and decided the organization needed to be handed over to the next generation.”

“…”

“They’re all inside. You can have their heads. You can claim you did it. In fact, it would be problematic for us if you don’t.”

I clicked my tongue.

What would happen to my reward in this case?

What if an assassin entered his target’s hideout only to find the target had committed suicide?

You didn’t often hear about that ending with him getting paid. The client would find some fault in it and turn him away.

"You lured us in to kill the leaders that were in your way."

"Yes?"

"So was the project using Amemura Ryuu-chan a decoy?"

"No, it didn't go that far. That project was about 5th on the priority list. It would have been great had it succeeded, but it could be abandoned if something better came along."

"What were you even trying to access with that?" I frowned. ""That 'monk' is not simply an Umibouzu. It is a guardian deity of the Amemura family created from the vague idea of their 'ancestors'. It changed form due to the effects of a major accident at sea, but the essence you wanted to contact was…"

"That's right. The guardian deity side," readily affirmed the man in the samue. "If you follow the Amemura family back far enough, you will reach the naval forces of the Heian period. But skilled military commanders of that time would occasionally become targets of religious beliefs. People did not want to be haunted by them."

"Meaning?"

"You need more explanation?" He shrugged. "To put it simply, this is a means of controlling a low-ranked god. The 'monk' may have fallen to the position of a Youkai, but it can be rebooted back to its position as a low-ranked god if a certain type of power is injected into it. …If a formula for that process can be determined, we will be able to freely change gears between Youkai and god. And that means we can drop gods down to the position of Youkai as well."

"…"

I see.

So the elderly leaders of Akki Rasetsu were trying to hold these people back.

Hyakki Yakou was the top ranked organization in this business, so why did they focus on Youkai rather than gods? There was a good reason for it.

These people had gotten so lost in their lust for power that they had lost sight of the risks.

“The original objective of Akki Rasetsu was to rearrange humans into being Youkai. Basically, it was just another form of the common desire to be immortal. The mainstream method is to transform one’s physical body using the properties of Youkai that are attached to a specific person such as an Inugami or a Jinmensou. But my methods are different.”

I waited for the proper timing of the conversation.

I then grabbed my suppressor-equipped handgun from my boot and fired repeatedly.

But I received the result I had expected.

Without changing his expression in the slightest, the man in the samue pulled a long obi-like scrap of paper from his pocket and used it to deflect the bullets.

The long, long piece of paper spread out around the man like a bird’s feathers.

“If you attach a Youkai to a human, they will not perfectly fuse together. To remake the human, you must directly alter the human. I am researching the power needed for that. If there is a power that can raise a Youkai up to the position of a god, what would happen if you injected it into a human? Isn’t it exciting to think what would be created?”

“That isn’t a magic charm. …It’s a scroll? Is it some sort of scripture?”

“Yes. It’s just a hanging scroll. I am a Youkai artist. My name is Houjou Touji. I am fairly well-known, so maybe you have heard of me? I am an artist who mass produces Youkai art that creates sinister curses.”

“I see. Art depicting Youkai or ghosts will *possess strange power in and of itself.* So that is your specialty. You thought you could give power to humans in the same way you give power to those scraps of paper.”

“More or less. It wasn’t easy. I had to secure my arsenal while pretending to obey the leaders in their mainstream idea of using a Shichinin Misaki.”

“In that case, why don’t you just carve a tattoo into your back?”

"I tried that. Too many of the samples destroyed themselves while wielding the Youkai's power. When it got bad enough, some of them even tore off the skin of their back and *fled out the window.*"

…Is that a Yuki Onna on that hanging scroll?

I had no idea what level of reproduction that created, but that was a deadly Youkai I wanted nothing to do with.

"Well, that's more or less the situation. We leaked information to call in assassins from across the country that could take the blame. Akki Rasetsu's leaders have already been killed. I have nothing left to do in Kyoto. I will give the credit to you. You can lie to your client and receive your reward. Any other questions?"

"Do you really think I'll let you leave?"

"That's what I thought."

The man in the samue who named himself Houjou stuck a hand in his pocket.

He scattered countless small scraps of paper like confetti.

They ignored the flow of the wind as they freely danced around.

"The sort of oddity that can be drawn out by human hands can be mass produced as much as needed."

…Are these photos?

And all of them show a Yuki Onna.

"You often hear that people meet a horrible fate if they handle spirit photography too roughly, right?"

"You're quite the talented man. So you can do it with a camera too?"

"Yes, but the accuracy drops even further. Oh, but don't think just anyone can do this. Getting the exposure, focus, and angle just right is not easy. Just a picture showing the Youkai is not enough. *You have to use the camera artistically.*"

Even if they were crude replicas, this was approximately 200 objects with the same power as a Yuki Onna.

And on top of that, nothing said Houjou had no other tricks up his sleeve. It was possible he had travelled around Japan and drawn or photographed Youkai with even more dangerous powers.

What if he attacked simultaneously with all of those?

“Now, how about we begin? If you made it this far, I assume you are no normal human. I cannot deny that I feel like seeing whether you are worthy of being drawn by my paintbrush.”

…Not good.

Could he be on the same level as the Illness Magic User? How did someone like this escape the notice of Hyakki Yakou? That organization must be falling into disorder in a lot of different ways.

Now, what to do?

“Feel free to come at me. But do not forget that you will meet a horrible fate if you treat these mysterious photographs and paintings too roughly and destroy them.”

Not only did they cause harm, but it seemed the curse would double if you resisted and destroyed them.

It was quite an excellent means of attack.

Without thinking, I reached for the Deadly Dragon Princess. Pulling it out was the proof that I had 100% lost.

But suddenly…

An odd vibration came from the ground.

It wasn’t an earthquake.

It was the footsteps of some giant existence.

Houjou and I simultaneously looked over at the source of the noise. A depression about the size of a small pond had been made in the large yard covered in small stones.

The “monk”.

That unknown thing with its invisible form had taken a step towards us.

It spoke with a roaring voice.

"…I will help you."

"Why would you be obligated to do that?"

"…I have always been the one who protects the Amemura family. It is obvious they plan to harm the Amemura family."

I see.

While Akki Rasetsu had achieved their objective and would soon leave Kyoto, it was possible they would eliminate the Amemura family to tie up all loose ends in that project.

But…

"I have no problem taking your help, but do I really look like a good person to you?"

"…I have no time to worry about the good or evil of individuals. I must combat an even greater evil in order to defeat the ones who will harm the Amemura family."

"Either way's fine with me."

And in response to this…

The man in the samue, Houjou Touji, did not change his expression at all.

With the same thin smile plastered on his face, he said, "My gallery is quite full. I doubt the interference of a Youkai or two will change anything. And I have no reason to hesitate in eliminating the remnants of a project we have already abandoned."

"So he says. What'll you do?" I asked.

"…I will bear all of the sins for destroying the artwork. The curse affects only the one who destroys them. I will bear all of it, leaving you free. And that will eliminate all of that young man's weapons."

"He has 200 deadly ones around him right now. Do you have any idea how much pain you will experience receiving the death agonies of all of them? The idea that Youkai cannot be killed by normal means no longer holds in our world."

"…If I must die along with him, then so be it. As long as you remain, you can finish off this young man once he is unarmed. I am contained in the framework of the Amemura family's ancestors, so I will naturally appear once more after enough generations of the family pass. My individual disappearance here is no real problem to the Amemura family."

"Let me be blunt. Amemura Ryuu-chan only sees you as a scary monster. She does not visit the family grave or Buddhist altar. You may have been originally created from their ancestors, but *you are now a collection of the remnants left over after some souls were destroyed like a piece of quantum cryptography.* In other words, you are not truly connected to Amemura Ryuu-chan through her ancestors. You are merely a Youkai that has taken on that role. Do you still feel an obligation to destroy yourself to protect them?"

"…Did you think I was doing this in hopes of being thanked? As long as I can protect the Amemura family, that is all that matters."

"Heh."

I couldn't help but laugh.

Who would have thought someone as straightforward as this would have his time to shine in this world?

"You are a true hero. Stick to that path and I will take care of everything afterwards," I said.

"…I thank you."

"No, thank you."

Ever so slightly…

Houjou's smile stiffened.

"You can't do it," he said.

"Do what?"

"My gallery is full! A single Youkai can never take on the burden of it all!!"

"That is not for you to decide. That is up to the willpower of the sort of ancestral guardian deity that can be found in any family."

His smile stiffened further.

“We” took a large step forward knowing full well what that stiffening meant.

Okay.

It’s time to settle this, you bastard.

Notes

1. ↑ Akki Rasetsu is a Japanese phrase referring to a man-eating monster or demon.
2. ↑ Inga Ouhou is a Japanese phrase referring to karma or one’s just deserts.
3. ↑ Umibouzu literally means Sea Monk

Chapter 3: Uchimaku Hayabusa @ Shibuya Girl A

Part 1

The value of land inside the ZR Yamanote Line was generally ridiculously expensive, but Ochanomizu was a student district. That meant a thorough enough search would turn up apartments cheap enough for a student.

But that meant the apartment was meant for a student. Normally, a single man with a job would be ashamed to live in one. In fact, the landlord would usually refuse someone like me, but I had managed to avoid that.

It seemed the female college students felt safer when they knew a police officer lived in the same apartment building.

I was a bit annoyed that the landlord used my private information as a sales point, but it was the best place I could find. As a pitiable public servant, I could not afford to do anything about it.

And so…

I was in the living room the apartment had despite only being meant for students. The table held quickly-made toast, milk, a premade salad, and simple scrambled eggs made in the microwave. While I ate that breakfast, my cell phone rang.

It was my sister-in-law’s number.

It was likely about the cardboard boxes in the corner of my room.

“Did you get them?” she asked.

“Yes, unfortunately. Three boxes is going too far.”

“Don’t be picky. They contain Intellectual Village-made rice, summer vegetables, soy sauce, miso, mirin, and sake. You would have to wait to even make a reservation to get that from a restaurant.”

That was true. And if word got out I had it, it would probably bring in tons of thieves and robbers.

“Please, give me a break. You know I can’t cook.”

"Um, this may be an awkward question, but how do you survive, Hayabusa-kun?"

"These days, you can make a dinner by buying a premade salad and side dish at the supermarket, throwing a pack of white rice in the microwave, and adding hot water to a cup of miso soup."

"That is not how to live a happy life."

I wanted to protest that I simply used the extra time for things other than food.

But before I could, I heard the sound of a struggle over the phone.

"Um, nee-san? What is going on?"

"The Yuki Onna and Nekomata are fighting behind me. They cannot agree whether to watch The Unknown Secrets of the Antarctic or The Pet Café that Cats Love. …Now, now, stop that! If you keep acting that selfishly, Shinobu will grow to hate you."

The sounds of a struggle immediately ceased.

My nephew's rare disposition seemed to have taken effect once more. Weren't the Yuki Onna and Nekomata both deadly Youkai? Then again, my disposition making them hate me and my brother's disposition making them fear him were quite something too.

After being sure the commotion was over, I returned to the conversation.

"Could you at least send cucumbers or tomatoes or something else you can slice up and eat as is? I don't even know what to do with a squash. I don't like getting a long line of brand-name crops the gourmets of Akasaka would drool over and just watching them rot."

"I will take that into consideration, but I cannot do anything about what I already sent you. If you are not going to learn to cook, you can use them to get to know your neighbors."

Having said that, my sister-in-law ended the call.

She probably just ran away because she did not like how the conversation was going.

But…

I was the one police officer living in an apartment building meant for students. I was never going to get to know my neighbors very closely. There would be a larger rift between us than between an elementary school student and a frightening looking PE teacher. If I rang my neighbor’s doorbell, they would probably think some incident had happened.

Then again, I couldn’t stand for brand-name crops on a level where a bunch of grapes cost 30 thousand yen to rot away into organic fertilizer, so I nervously headed to the neighboring room.

I rang the doorbell and a female voice so unambitious I wondered if she had low blood pressure came over the intercom.

“What is it…?”

“Um, my family went a little overboard in sending me summer vegetables, so do you have room for any?”

I heard frantic footsteps, a crash, and then a shout of “Slippers!? Where are my slippers!?” from beyond the door.

The door shot open and a college girl in a track suit with a towel around her neck and a compress on her shoulders charged out with a full-faced smile.

“How wonderful, you Kasajizou!! Now I can escape this life of soaking ramen in water to infinitely double it in size!!”

“How low on money are you!?”

Part 2

Despite all that trouble, I still had to leave for work at the same time. As much as I would have loved some more time. After closing the front door of my apartment, I headed on foot to the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department.

My workplace was in a nice place like Sakuradamon. That was why I wanted a place to live in Ochanomizu.

“Oh, if it isn’t the detective.”

“What the hell are you doing here, mystery freak?”

When I turned around toward that sudden voice from behind, I’m betting my expression was not a pleased one. A girl with twintails named Hishigami Enbi was smiling at me.

That mystery freak could be summed up as “a suspicious person who frequently appears at the crime scenes of bizarre murders”.

The mystery freak preferred to wear revealing outfits such as swimsuits, but now she was wearing the obvious outfit of a student: a short-sleeved blouse and a wine-red pleated skirt. I was fairly certain it was the uniform of a nearby high class girl’s school. I had no idea if the kneesocks were a designated part of the uniform.

Knowing her, she would say she chose to wear them herself because they were necessary to solve a murder. But as long as you did not look too deeply, she was just a nice rich girl.

There were even banks and heavy industry companies that used the name Hishigami.

If you flipped through the channels during primetime, you would probably find a commercial for a company affiliated with her family.

“I’m just headed to school. You’re the one out of place here, detective. I thought you usually used the subway.”

“Why do you think I would be walking to work in this horrid heat while dressed in a suit, mystery moron?”

"Hah hahn. The suit looks cheaper than necessary, but it also looks new. Did your boss tell you to hurry up and break it in so you can run around in it?"

"…That's right, dammit," I replied in annoyance.

Police detectives did not wear cheap suits because they had no fashion sense. While it was not as bad as the police dramas where everything was resolved in 60 minutes, a police detective was one of the few jobs that required physical labor in a suit. The suit would get muddy, bloody, and torn by suspects armed with blades. And so no one would wear a custom-made high-class suit.

And since we had to run around a lot, a brand new suit could be a bit restrictive. That was why we intentionally put an extra burden on a new suit to break it in.

For that reason, police detectives gave the impression of being the public servants with zero fashion sense who wore cheap mass-produced suits that were horribly beat up.

"By the way, detective, what are you pursuing now?"

"I can't tell a civilian that. Employees have a duty to keep secrets."

"I'm feeling a bit depressed. You could always let me join in if it's something I would enjoy."

"?"

The mystery freak pouted her lips, but we had arrived near the famous rich girl's school. Enbi waved and then left.

Afterwards, I wiped away my sweat with a handkerchief and stopped at a convenience store for water when I couldn't stand it anymore. Finally, I made it to my workplace in Sakuradamon.

It was the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, the symbol of the city's law and order.

Due to the influence of police dramas, it seemed to have become the symbol of Japan's police force as a whole. Looking at that awe-inspiring building was enough to improve even my mood a bit. It always made me realize my job would directly affect people's lives for better or worse.

The uniformed police officer standing in front of the entrance gave me a faithful salute.

However, the usual fastidious greeting did not accompany it.

Instead, a middle-aged police officer whispered to me.

“Oh, Uchimaku-san. You probably shouldn’t look inside right now.”

“Eh? Is something going on? Things do seem a bit noisy… Are they filming a drama?”

The front of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department was one of the leading location filming spots in all of Japan. But to prevent terrorism, the inside shots were all done on sets back at the studio. I highly doubted a request to directly film inside would have been approved.

In response, the middle-aged police officer shook his hand side to side and said, “No, no. Um, it’s summer break, so it seems a group of elementary school children is being given a tour. Naturally, they weren’t allowed to bring in their cell phones or any other recording devices.”

“Oh… Yeah, I don’t want to get caught up in that.”

With that offhand comment, I peered through the glass door and into the front lobby. Even through the glass, I could hear a chaotic deluge of voices.

“Do you have katsudon!?”

“Where’s Investigator Itako from TV?”

“Can you show us the investigation headquarters!?”

There were a lot more kids than I had expected. It looked like more than 100 but not quite 200. A young female police officer was waving a small flag in front of them, so she looked somehow like a bus tour guide.

I whispered to the middle-aged police officer who was still hanging around for some reason.

“Looks like the Sakura Police have plenty to do. Oh, wow. Look at the face of the big guy from the organized crime countermeasures division. I’ve never seen him look so exhausted. I gotta snap a photo of this.”

“Wait, don’t do that, Uchimaku-san! If he notices, he’ll constrict your carotid artery!!”

“You say that, Nakada-san, but I can see your shoulders shaking as you try to hold back laughter.”

Just as I held up my phone, my eyes met with those of the big man displayed on the small screen.

That fifth dan in judo (openweight) opened wide the eyes of his stone-like face and pointed straight at me.

“That’s a detective from Department 1!!”

“Bh!?” I spat out.

Well over 100 children all turned to look in my direction.

“A detective?”

“A detective from Department 1!”

“Investigation Department 1 is where they shoot handguns all the time to kill the criminals!!”

“Th-th-that bastard!! He turned them on me because Department 1 is more popular!!”

Just to be clear, detectives in Investigation Department 1 did not shoot handguns all the time. It would be a lot easier if we could, but we prided ourselves at being the best in the world when it came to capturing criminals alive.

The middle-aged police officer then said, “Uchimaku-san! If you’re going to run, do it quickly! You can enter through the materials delivery entrance. Otherwise, the children will surround you!!”

“No, it’s a bit late for that! Wah! This is like a store during a really good sale!!”

I need to turn their focus somewhere else!! But is there any job more popular than a detective from Department 1!?

Just as I started to panic, a god of salvation appeared.

Mezu Gen. He was an older man with deep wrinkles on his face. His hair was a very shiny black because it was dyed. While he was not as muscular as the large man from the organized crime countermeasures division, his sharp gaze held enough force to silence a fifth dan in judo. He was the leader of my department. However, he was often called “cute” by the young female police officers because of his habit of wearing the necktie he received as a father’s day present.

“…What is this commotion?”

Instead of answering his simple question, I pointed at him and raised my voice as loud as I could to announce, “That’s the chief of Department 1!!”

To make a long story short, he slammed his fist down on my head later on.

But do not forget that the department chief pointed at a man in the prime of his life who came running up after a jog around the imperial palace (accompanied by an extremely annoyed looking bodyguard in black) and shouted “That’s the superintendent general!!”

Part 3

I worked for Investigation Department 1 of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department.

But that did not mean I was always having meetings at the investigation headquarters or rushing out to suspects' houses based on an important new piece of investigative information.

Sometimes not much was going on.

The department chief would not call out to a low-ranking detective like me often, yet he suddenly did just that.

“Uchimaku, you have the safety class today, right?”

“…What?”

Since I had nothing better to do, I had been trying to work up my own original blend by mixing together several different types of coffee beans, but now my eyes opened wide.

The department chief went on to say, “Y'know, the safety class where you head out to a school to put on a puppet show and kamishibai. The materials you need are here. Be there in half an hour. That is all.”

“Wait, wait, wait! That isn't a job for Department 1. What about the Life Safety Division or Traffic Division? In fact, why is anyone from the main police department doing it? Can't an officer from the school's area handle it?”

“Normally, yes. But it seems middle and high school students these days don't like kamishibai or puppet shows, so they keep falling asleep. They want a detective who has felt real danger to more effectively explain the recent SNS trouble. Someone who reeks of blood should give it more tension.”

“Geh.”

As the department chief breathed a heavy sigh, I recalled a certain fact.

It had been me who had brought an end to the SNS murders back in

May.

“But won’t we get complaints if we use an actual incident to draw their attention?”

“The police’s job is not just to resolve crimes that have been committed. We must also prevent crimes before they are committed. We will use whatever means we have available to us. But be careful. Make sure to hide all personal information.”

The department chief placed a giant envelope on my desk and quickly left.

I had no choice but to check inside the envelope.

“How am I supposed to know what to say when I have to be there in half an hour?”

“I can still hear you, Uchimaku. I did not tell you until now because I did not want to deal with your complaining. Do you understand now? Then get going.”

The safety class was a school activity, so I could not be late. I glanced through the materials, put them back in the large envelope, and left.

While I rode the elevator to the first floor, it stopped midway down. A detective from the Life Safety Division got on. Unlike me, he was the type of detective that always wore a nice suit.

“Hey, Uchimaku.”

“Toujou-san.”

“I heard you have to go out in this heat to present a safety class at a middle school. This is the middle of summer break, so the students probably won’t be happy about it. Try not to lose the attention of every single student in the school while they’re gathered in the gym. Nee ha ha.”

“Chehh. I take it I was the only one that didn’t know about this ‘surprise party’.”

“You need to be around some living people every once in a while. It’s not healthy to deal with nothing but murder cases.”

Once the elevator reached the first floor, Toujou-san left.

While it was true I dealt with nothing but murder cases, I did try to keep my focus on living people.

Part 4

The middle school was within walking distance. Most of the police officers gathered there were uniformed officers from the “usual” station. I felt out of place as the only murder case detective in the bunch.

And…

“…You can’t be serious.”

“Is something the matter?” asked the school’s female director in a refined manner.

That was a very difficult question to answer.

Outside the window of the faculty room, I could see the mystery freak waving at me with a big smile on her face.

This is her school?

A very bad feeling wrapped around me despite having no proof anything was going to happen. But just as I expected, my cell phone rang. After receiving the never-before-heard threat of “come on out or I’ll charge into the faculty room and kiss you”, I had no choice but to exit the school building.

“Hello, detective.”

“What do you want, mystery freak? I’m kind of busy.”

“So am I. I need to get to the gym soon for the school assembly. But let’s talk first. If you ignore me, I’ll forcibly have my way with you here.”

I let out a heavy sigh.

My mental state was similar to some chocolate melting under the hot sun.

“If you’re interested, I take it this is about some kind of incident.”

“That’s right. What about you, detective? Why are you here for this SNS safety class? Are you using it to get into the school because you caught the same scent I'm after?"

"?"

I had no ulterior motive for being here, but was something actually happening around the mystery freak?

"If it's urgent, I'll hear you out. Despite how you act, you are civilian and I am a police officer."

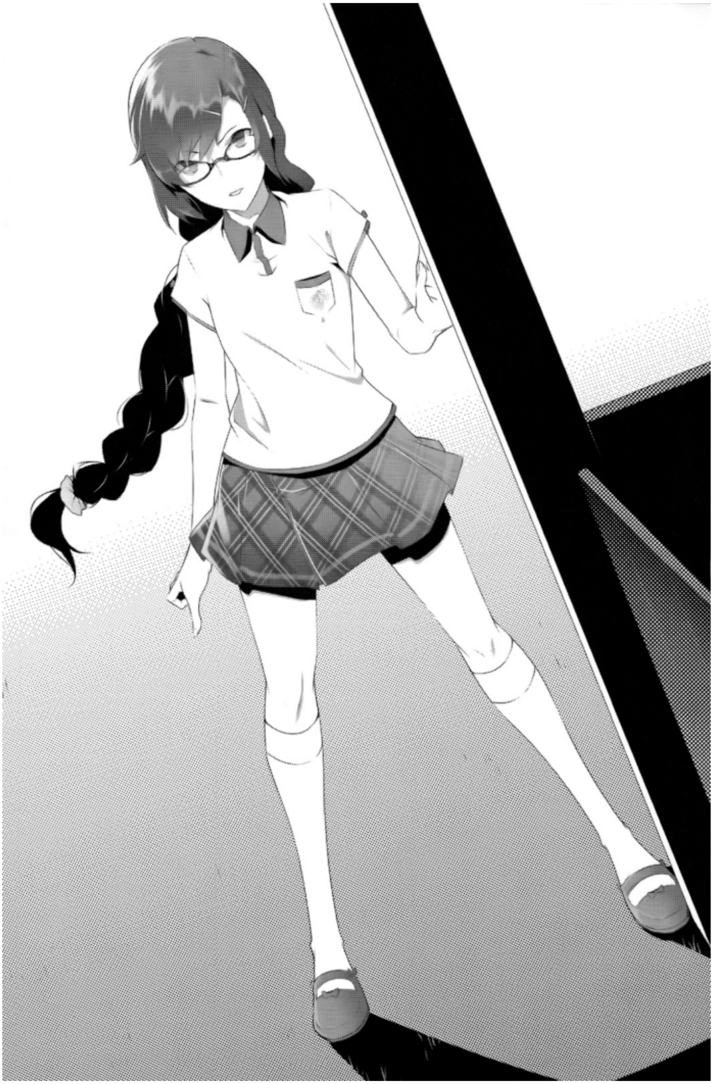
"So you understand."

I had tried to warn her by emphasizing the fact that she was a civilian, but the mystery freak did not give in at all.

She glanced away from me and beckoned someone over with her hand.

"Okay, Tomoe-chaaan. This is the detective I was talking about. There's no distinction or division between adult and child with him, so he's our ally."

I do too have a division and distinction there!!



It would be a major problem if I still acted like a middle schooler at this age!!

“…Detective?”

A face peered out from behind a pillar along a nearby outside pathway.

She was a girl with an appearance that made you think her braided hair was to help with her school records. She wore glasses, but she looked more like an athlete or martial artist than a bookish girl. Her body was wrapped in supple muscles. She appeared to have a better figure than the mystery freak.

However, both her muscles and figure did not look natural. It may have been the popular thing to do, but it appeared she had done a fair bit of “grooming”. She was the type who would have tons of diet ebooks on her phone.

You weren’t supposed to push yourself too hard while still growing, but the world was a harsh place.

“No, Enbi. It can’t be a detective. I don’t think he can help us.”

She seemed openly hostile, but it would have been jumping the gun to assume she was hiding something she felt guilty about. During some sort of incident, even the most innocent normal citizen did not want to approach the police.

“Tomoe, he isn’t that kind of detective.”

“Enbi, I decided to ask you for help because you gather information using several different routes, but I am opposed to using him. Forget my request. I’ll do this on my own.”

This Tomoe-chan turned her back on us and muttered one last comment.

Her voice was quiet, but it possessed a piercing sharpness.

“I can’t trust the police. They can’t do anything.”

After watching Tomoe-chan leave, Enbi sighed.

Now then…

“I’m not trying to show off, but explain to me what is going on. This smells really fishy to me.”

“Fine, but neither of us has much time. We can continue this in the afternoon. Let’s finish with this school day first.”

Part 5

As expected, the best I could manage in the SNS safety class was to make sure it did not absolutely fail. There was no way I could give much of a presentation when I was suddenly thrown up on stage with no script or rehearsal time. Think of it as the school expecting some high-level acrobatic flying while all I delivered was a safe emergency landing. That required some skill too, but it was tragically difficult for others to tell.

But at least the mystery freak had managed to suppress her laughter while listening to me speak.

After finishing with the school day, Enbi and I met up outside of the school.

“Detective, do you want to get lunch somewhere?”

“It’s exactly noon. Everywhere will be busy.”

“…Oh. That’s a sad statement that shows what sort of restaurant you eat at.”

“More importantly, tell me if you know of anything that might be a serious issue.”

“We can speak while we walk.” The mystery freak raised her index finger while taking the lead. “I will omit any uncertain information if that is okay with you.”

“Just tell me what you can.”

“Lately, Jinmensou have been spreading among high school girls in Shibuya.”

“…In Shibuya?”

I had thought every restaurant in a student district like Ochanomizu would be packed at lunchtime, but we found an empty café a bit off the major roads where the employees were dressed as masters and maids. The mystery freak swiftly moved to a table in the back like she had done it a thousand times before.

“This place makes all the sales it needs for the day with the morning meals they sell in front of the station. Everything else is just a hobby."

"I don't care about the restaurant. Tell me about this incident. What was that about high school girls in Shibuya? I've never seen those creatures except on TV."

You could say they were synonymous with lies.

Most anyone could easily tell just how much truth there was in any rumor that began with "according to some high school girls in Shibuya".

The police received a lot of unreliable-sounding reports and tips, but the credibility dropped considerably if that term was mentioned.

After ordering a hot sandwich and an iced coffee produced in some place with a horribly long foreign-sounding name, the mystery freak said, "Well, just think of that as a symbol or a framework that was easy to use. The Jinmensou problem has reached one of our students. That would be middle school girl in Ochanomizu. It might have reached some elementary school students as well. Think of it as being a problem for all minors who hang out in Shibuya."

"Just to check: are you sure there really is something to this?"

"Of course."

I glanced through the menu and grimaced.

Why is there not a single thing on the menu spelled with less than 50 characters?

The mystery freak ignored my hesitation and ordered something for me without asking.

"Jinmensou, those giant tumors in the shape of a human face, are spreading among those girls. You came from an Intellectual Village, so you know what a Jinmensou is, right?"

"…A Youkai."

"The story goes that they appear as a symbol of evil deeds when a person has lied or sinned too much. It's the same as the Futakuchi Onna. But they do not have the ability to kill as they merely appear on the surface of the body.”

Seeing one in an Intellectual Village was one thing, but it bothered me a bit that Jinmensou were appearing in the great metropolis of Tokyo.

Youkai disliked modern cities, so they tended to gather in rural areas. It was possible someone was forcibly altering that aspect of the Youkai so the Jinmensou would spread through these Shibuya high school girls.

The mystery freak put mustard on the hot sandwich when it arrived which made the picky master frown.

“These Jinmensou are a very serious problem when they appear in the sensitive adolescent school society. You would likely be isolated if those around you found out something that creepy had appeared on your body. …And that goes double for a girl’s skin. They hold irresponsible dreams in regards to their skin.

“Would they really be purged like that?”

“It wouldn’t be so bad with a simple scar or burn. After all, it isn’t your fault if you get hurt. But a Jinmensou is a Youkai. And it appears in response to lies and sins. Not only does an ugly tumor several centimeters large appear, but everyone assumes it’s your fault. These people can’t help but be socially purged at an accelerated rate.”

Isolation.

Ostracism.

A student who had no place in the inescapable framework of a school might feel enough fear to end their own life.

Was that the issue the mystery freak was worried about?

No.

That did not include a “criminal” which is what she would be most interested in.

“I understand that this leaves a lot unknown about the appearance of the Jinmensou,” she continued. “But what if this is a Youkai-related Package that allows someone to freely make these face-shaped tumors appear or disappear? That would give this person the ability to ostracize any student in a school at any time. Doesn't that sound like it would lead to crime? For example, it could be used to control the frightened girls affected by it."

If that was true, it was indeed a problem with a great risk.

If the situation only advanced below the surface due to the restrictions of a school society, talk of it could definitely spread around without the organizations of adults learning of it.

But…

"…? What's wrong, detective?"

"Nothing."

I was unable to work up any motivation without a murder or a corpse and this seemed outside the usual realm of her twisted interests.

"Hm? Are you feeling unmotivated because it's outside the jurisdiction of Department 1?"

"My job can be rather vague. You could say it's my job to resolve any major incidents or matters that are not handled by other departments."

And if I went back to the office, I would just be given another annoying job by the department chief.

I decided to make up a lie about feeling sick from the anxiety of suddenly going up on stage so I could avoid heading back for a while.

"Let's do some investigation. Where should we start?"

"Shibuya, of course. I'm meeting someone there."

"Who?"

"One of the rumored high school girls. We won't get anywhere without first seeing one of these Jinmensou for ourselves."

Part 6

We rode the train to the ZR Shibuya station.

“Did you meet this high school girl on the internet?”

“Yes, but I’m not entirely sure it was really a high school girl I was talking with. It might have been some group of gaudy guys who are trying to become kidnappers. That’s why I asked you to come along, detective.”

“…”

“Just as you explained in the gym today, SNSs are filled with dangers. It only makes sense to bring along some insurance. Kee hee hee.”

Please don’t laugh like that. Just thinking about how awkward and nervous I was on that stage makes me want to die.

We left the station and headed to a plaza surrounded by countless buildings. The plaza doubled as a large bus roundabout and was often used as a meeting point.

I beg you, Mr. Uniformed Police Officer. I’m one of you. Just because I have a girl clinging to my side doesn’t mean you need to glare at me with such suspicion.

“But this Jinmensou issue has a delicate side to it, right? Will she really open up to someone like me? I’m a guy, I’m an adult, and I’m with the police. That’s three distinct boundaries.”

“I’d say it depends on the person. Some girls might want to ask for help from someone larger than themselves.”

“But that girl at your school held some pretty blatant hostility towards me. What was her name? Tomoe-chan?”

“Hachikawa Tomoe-chan. Her situation is a bit unique.”

“No, people like you who can talk to a police officer so cheerfully are the exception.”

“Oh, c’mon, detective. Surely you don’t think you’re a whiskydrinking, trench coat-wearing, tough-looking nice guy who lives in a hard boiled world. You're more like a cute little animal."

"I'll have to disagree if you're trying to say I fill the role of a mascot. But anyway…"

I trailed off before I could continue.

I sharpened my senses and checked my surroundings again.

The mystery freak called out, "Oh, it's Tomoe."

"…"

The same Hachikawa Tomoe-chan from before was glaring our way from in front of a convenience store at the base of one of the large buildings surrounding the plaza.

I suddenly recalled that she had said she would "do this on her own".

"Hey, mystery freak. She isn't the high school girl afflicted with a Jinmensou you were talking about, is she?"

I received a blatant click of the tongue in response.

But from Tomoe-chan rather than the mystery freak.

"If that was the case, I wouldn't use such a roundabout method. It would have been simpler just to talk with you at school."

"I suppose that's true."

"…You're such an idiot. You had enough information to figure that out. If you had thought about it at all, you would have known right away."

Yes, but it's my job to ask those things you can "know right away" dozens or even hundreds of times while watching the reaction of the people I ask.

Hachikawa Tomoe-chan pointed at my nose.

"Anyway, I don't need anyone as useless as you here. If this Shibuya high school girl learns a policeman is here, she might turn right around and run away. Then we will lose any hint we might have gotten."

"So you're saying…um…"

"Hachikawa. Hachikawa Tomoe."

I of course already knew that, but calling her by her name before she had introduced herself would only have increased her distrust of me. Playing dumb could be a real pain.

"Hachikawa-san, are you here to contact the same person as the mystery frea-…I mean, as Hishigami-san?"

"That's right. I was the one that asked Enbi for help after meeting this girl online. If I had known that would lead to someone as troublesome as you tagging along, I never would have done so!"

I felt a bit bad for the mystery freak, but this was the normal reaction.

It would have been stranger if some boring man wearing a suit was not rejected upon trying to join a group of sensitive adolescent girls.

However…

"*We can talk about this later.*" I said.

"…What?"

"Move away from the entrance to that convenient store. Pay attention while walking through the city. *The siren attached under the eaves is on.*"

That was an SOS indicating a robbery.

It had been this I had initially noticed, not Tomoe-chan.

I turned to the mystery freak and said, "I'm going in. You take Hachikawa-san away from here. The robber might try to flee. Stay away from any obvious paths and wait. Understand?"

"Detective, did you bring your handgun?"

"Don't underestimate me."

I was of course going to handle this unarmed.

I was a police officer. I would have a chance to be of some use outside of extreme exceptions like Zashou Island where every single villager was guilty and armed with hunting weaponry.

But I frowned in confusion upon subduing the culprit who was shouting while threatening the cashier with something like an awl.

The criminal was a high school girl.

And when her skirt flipped up, I caught a glimpse of something on her thigh.

“…A Jinmensou?”

Part 7

A report had to be submitted in the process of handing the criminal over to the local police station, so my department chief naturally learned of what happened. He shouted angrily at me with incredible force over the phone, but even he seemed hesitant to be too angry since no one was hurt, no damage was done, and the (attempted) robber had been arrested.

As I killed time in the police station's standard waiting room, a young detective from the station approached me with a clipboard in hand.

"I am Inoue."

"Hi, I am Uchimaku."

"Thank you for your help. We will handle investigation if you do not mind."

"Sure, sure. Um, do I need to sign this?"

"Yes."

I spoke to Inoue-san while using a ballpoint pen to sign my name on the paperwork on the clipboard.

"I would like to hear her motive if that's okay."

"That is fine, but isn't this more a job for the Life Safety Division than Department 1?"

"…? Has she already said something?"

"A bit." Inoue-san lowered his voice to a whisper. "This was an attempted robbery, so she was of course after money. However, the main issue is why she wanted that money."

"…Have you confirmed that she has a Jinmensou?"

"She showed it to us," replied Inoue-san. "She has a tumor about 5 cm across resembling a human face on her right thigh. It looks similar to the bump left by a bug bite."

According to the mystery freak, someone could freely cause these Jinmensou to appear or disappear and could therefore threaten the targeted girls. But for a simple robbery?

As I thought, Inoue-san said something I did not except.

“The girl…Her name is Sayama Yae by the way. She says she needs the money to pay an exorbitant medical fee to treat the Jinmensou.”

“To treat it?”

“Yes.” Inoue-san paused for a beat. “With cosmetic surgery.”

After hearing what I needed to hear, I left the police station. It was already evening. The mystery freak had been troubling the uniformed police officer at the entrance with a barrage of curious questions, but now she ran over to me.

I looked around and asked, “Hey, where’s Hachikawa-san?”

“She left. It looked like this was quite a shock to her.”

“Had it been a shock for a violent crime to occur so nearby or for the person with a hint to the Jinmensou incident to be taken in by the police?”

“More importantly, detective, what did the high school girl who committed that attempted robbery say?”

“I can’t reveal information on an ongoing investigation.”

“Is she in debt over cosmetic surgery that insurance won’t cover?”

“…”

I quickly checked over my suit for any listening devices.

The mystery freak shook her index finger and said, “Tsk tsk. If you think about it, you will come across several odd points, Uchimaku-kun.”

“Oh, is that so.”

“Don’t ignore me!!”

I started to walk to the subway station, but the mystery freak ran up and latched onto my back.

Stop that! That police officer is getting a dangerous look in his eyes!!

“For one thing, it doesn’t make sense to commit a crime after promising to meet with me or Tomoe. I can only think she was planning to get arrested from the beginning. But what would leave her with so few options? I can’t think of very many situations.”

“What if the person who gave her the Jinmensou demanded she bring them money?”

“Then she would have tried to make sure the robbery succeeded.” The mystery freak moved from my back and circled around in front of me. “That high school girl might have been thinking of opposing the person behind the Jinmensou from the moment she initially contacted Tomoe to meet her. But she must have reached some sort of limit in the time between then and now. Since it was a robbery, it must have to do with money. And if the girl was trying to oppose the Jinmensou, then it isn’t hard to guess how she would do so.”

If the Jinmensou disappeared, she would have nothing more to fear.

So she would remove it by force.

But it was a giant tumor 5 cm across on her thigh. This was different from healing a pimple. If she used a blade to cut it off, she would need to call an ambulance.

In that case, it would be quickest to leave it to a professional.

But…

“What good would it do to have the Jinmensou surgically removed? I thought you suspected the criminal could somehow cause the Jinmensou to appear and disappear. And this is a Youkai that appears as a symbol of lies and sins. Won’t it just appear again if you try to forcibly remove it?”

“Perhaps. But how is that a problem for the clinic being paid to remove it?”

“…”

“If a Jinmensou appears, they can surgically remove it. If it appears again, they can surgically remove it again. …That cycle is perfect for them. It ensures repeat customers, so the clinic probably loves it. It’s entirely possible they have been *whispering something about these Jinmensou* just like they use the characteristics of obesity and acne to their advantage in their advertisements.”

We had been assuming the criminal was using the isolated system of a school, but cosmetic surgery did seem to provide the criminal with more to gain.

No matter how deeply the cosmetic surgery clinic was related to this as a whole, it seemed we needed to look into it.

Part 8

At 11:30 that night, I finished my work for the day and decided to leave the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. When I reached the first floor lobby, Toujou-san from the Life Safety Division entered with a lot of subordinates in tow.

“Huh? Were you out for a nighttime raid?” I asked.

“Yes. In fact, you’re the one that gave us this extra work.”

“?”

“We stopped by the cosmetic surgery clinic related to the Jinmensou. We checked any places that had received an unnatural number of new patients recently and found it right away. It was Kaguya Beauty Clinic in Harajuku. It was a stereotypical ‘pitfall’.”

“Ah…”

So it was an illegal business that targeted minors. This was common with OB/GYN, cosmetic surgery, or other clinics that deal with delicate issues. They would charge exorbitant prices and then open up pathways to various underground means of earning money for those who could not pay. These “pitfalls” were designed so people would not be able to pay.

This had mostly started after all abortions in which the mother’s life was not threatened had been banned by the Newborn Protection Law meant to fight the tide of Japan’s low birthrate. These sorts of business had started appearing and spreading what fields they dealt in.

“So where did this pitfall lead? A subcontractor in charge of phone scams?”

“A group that stockpiles cell phones and resells them. It does not look suspicious if high school girls constantly buy the latest phones. This might be related to *a large criminal organization*. Now we need to meet with the Organized Crime Countermeasures Division. Thanks for the all-nighter you gave us, Uchimaku-kun. Maybe I’ll treat you to something later.”

“…Was the clinic involved in giving the girls the Jinmensou?”

If so, all the loose ends had been tied up.

Toujou-san shrugged and said, “We looked through everything, but that was probably done elsewhere.”

“Do you have proof of that?”

“The disturbance was too great. If Kaguya Beauty Clinic controlled everything, they would have kept it all on a lower scale that would have been harder to find.”

I see.

That meant the clinic was simply profiting off of something someone else was causing.

The true criminal behind it all was elsewhere.

“Understood. Call me if it looks like you’ll need Department 1 for anything.”

“It is our job in the Life Safety Division to ensure you are not needed.”

I parted ways with Toujou-san and left the building.

It was very late at night, but the roads still had cars on them. That said, there were not many options when it came to eating out. Bars would still be open, but they got expensive if you used them as a primary source of food.

I had no choice but to enter a nearby convenience store and put a microwaveable side dish into a shopping basket.

That was when I ran into the mystery freak.

“Detective.”

“I’m going to stop asking how you always show up like this. And I won’t tell you anything about the clinic. That’s police information.”

“I doubt you found anything. That clinic itself was nothing important.”

“The clinic itself?” I asked as the mystery freak grabbed a package of drinkable yogurt.

“I was able to get my hands on a list of people who used Kaguya Beauty Clinic. It wasn’t just high school girls. The list contains everyone from housewives to elementary school kids. But I recognized some of the names on the list.”

In this case, she did not simply mean she saw the names of some acquaintances.

She went on to say, “Detective, do you remember the SNS murders case you solved back in May?”

“What about it?”

“Go back over it again. That will tell you how deep this goes.”

How deep.

That was what the mystery freak said.

“Can I assume something dangerous is lurking down below all this?”

“If there was not, I would not give you such an unnatural warning. You were the one who directly solved that case even if I helped a bit. The ones behind the Jinmensou likely view you as the most dangerous person to them. So what if you do not stop at the beauty clinic and dig deeper? *The odds are good the criminals will take direct action against you.*”

“Understood.” I checked on the contents of my basket. “If they introduce themselves so obviously, I will have an easier time arresting them.”

The mystery freak smiled a bit and patted my shoulder.

“You’ll be fine with that mindset. …But really be careful. If I’m right, these aren’t people who will hold back from attacking just because their enemy is a police officer.”

Enbi headed on to the register, paid for her drinkable yogurt, and left the store.

That mystery freak was accustomed to mysterious serial murders, so this must be truly dangerous if she felt the need to warn me so seriously.

I decided to remain focused as I paid at the register and left the convenience store.

But…

I never thought I would be taken out not even 50 meters from the convenience store.

A sudden blunt blow to the back of my head sent me to the ground where I was then assaulted by a storm of violent kicks and punches.

Part 9

When I came to, I was in the police hospital.

The sky outside the window was orange. I assumed it was dawn, but it turned out to be sunset. The electrodes attached to me and tube on my arm were enough to tell me something horrible had happened to me.

“You aren’t looking too good,” said Toujou-san of the Life Safety Division from where he sat on a folding chair.

I frowned in the hospital bed and asked, “Um, why are you here, Toujou-san?”

“The witness report said it was a group of boys. As a street fight, it was handed over to our division. …I’m not sure how anyone could tell exactly how old they were since it was dark and they were wearing full face helmets, but people tend to assume late night attacks like that are the work of boys.” Toujou-san gave a slight smile. “But they have guts to attack and try to kill a police officer. We’ll make sure to find who did this.”

“…Um, what exactly is the situation? My memories are hazy after the first hit, so I don’t really know what happened.”

I doubted I had been able to escape in that situation.

Had this enemy simply been giving me a warning instead of trying to kill me?

Or had something caused them to stop before they finished the job?

“Oh, is that so? The attack occurred in the early morning last night near a convenience store in Ochanomizu. A group of four or five helmeted males – well, technically we don’t know for sure they were male, but that’s what the witness said – beat you to a pulp on the side of the road. But the attackers ran off when the witness screamed. It seems the attackers were speaking Japanese.”

“I see. Good….”

It was not my survival I was glad of.

It was that this witness had not been hurt after letting out that scream.

And if I was the only victim, that meant the mystery freak had not been involved despite being nearby.

Toujou-san toyed with the remote to the room's TV.

"What do you think of the situation, Uchimaku?"

"I don't like it."

I had been injured just after receiving a warning.

Unless some unrelated group of boys had coincidentally decided to attack me at that moment, the attacker's intent might very well have been to assassinate me.

In this country, not many deadly weapons were easily obtained.

But it took skill to sneak up behind a detective who had some knowledge of judo and kendo.

Had the attackers run away when the witness screamed because they had decided killing the witness as well would make the attack stand out too much?

If that was the case…

Whoever was behind the attack had not given up on taking my life. The odds were good they would try to use some other method of eliminating me.

"Don't look so grim. I don't know who did this, but they can't do anything while you are here in the police hospital. You can stay here until I put an end to this."

"I can't do that."

If my opponent saw street violence as but one card among many options with which to kill me, they might be a highly skilled specialist.

It was possible they possessed a card that allowed them to kill a target in a police hospital while making it look like the target's condition merely took a turn for the worse.

The police hospital may have been secure, but my location could not be hidden while I was hospitalized.

If the enemy arrived to kill me, my safety was not guaranteed.

I gathered my strength to sit up and felt a dull pain in my head and across the rest of my upper body. I grimaced, but ignored with the pain. I could not remain on the defensive. To survive, I had to go on the offensive and hunt down the identity of my enemy.

“Wait, wait. Aren’t you getting a little too hot-blooded? Are you okay?”

“No. It’s because I’m a coward that I feel the need to go on the offensive here.”

Merely changing from the hospital gown and into my suit was enough to make me want to scream, but I had to bear with it.

“I want to talk with the person who saved my life. Can you get me that information?”

“I can, but you explain this to your department chief. I’m not going to save you from him.” Toujou-san pulled out a notepad and flipped through the pages. “Let’s see, it was a student from Ochanomizu. Her name is *Hachikawa Tomoe-san*. She is a minor in middle school, so be careful with how you handle this. At her age, the people around her will probably make a bigger deal out of this than she will.”

Part 10

Hachikawa Tomoe-chan, the witness of the attack, lived in a family-oriented apartment in Ochanomizu. It was seven in the evening, so I was not sure if the pillar of the family, the father, would be home yet. I could smell the scents of dinner being prepared.

…*What a pain.*

The situation would be a lot easier to handle if both parents were home. I did not want the father thinking I had intentionally come by while he was away.

The front entrance automatically locked, so I could not even enter the apartment building. I entered the room number to call them over the intercom. As expected, Hachikawa Tomoe-chan's mother sounded displeased when I said I was a police detective. Although she did not start talking about warrants and lawyers based on what she had seen on TV dramas, so it could have been worse.

But I needed her consent. If she refused to let me in, there was nothing I could do. If I abused my power and claimed she was obstructing the duties of a public servant, I would be stuck writing an apology in the seiza position by the end of the day. I would probably have my pay reduced for a week as well.

What is she going to do?

Just as I started wondering that, I heard footsteps belonging to someone other than the mother. The mother then called out the name Tomoe. The speaker then produced the sound of a door opening. I tilted my head in puzzlement and Hachikawa Tomoe-chan came running out to the front of the apartment building before long.

"D-dete-detective!? What are you doing out of the hospital!? You were bleeding so much!"

"My injuries were not life threatening. And even if I am a police officer, I am still a working member of society. Everyone knows you have to work if you are able."

"Everyone knows that…?"

"Well, I know I look pretty pathetic with all these bandages, but I'm doing fine. You don't need to worry about me. More importantly, do you mind if I ask some questions about last night? The attack might have been related to the Jinmensou incident."

"…"

Tomoe-chan fell silent.

Finally, she opened her mouth to speak.

"Why are you pursuing this so seriously? This is just another job to you. Unlike me, you have plenty of other incidents to worry about."

I decided it was best to hide the fact that I wanted a chance to strike back before the enemy could make their next move. It was likely out of guilt over *not being able to save me* that she was actually speaking with me and being fairly polite.

"I can't say this is the job I want to work on most, but it comes in second. I do my job because I want to, so I am willing to risk my life for it. Is that so strange?"

"…You're an idiot," muttered Tomoe-chan. "But you might have more guts than that person."

…That person?

She may have been referring to the person that had caused her dislike of the police.

But gathering information about the attack came first.

"It would be a huge help if you could go through everything you know about last night's attack. First of all, what were you doing there?"

"That convenience store may be a good distance from here, but it is a convenient place for reading magazines without buying them. I use it as a destination when I go jogging."

"…You jog that late at night?"

"I do it just before going to bed. My mom-…My parents let me as long as I keep my cell phone's GPS on."

Hachikawa Tomoe-chan had a nice figure wrapped in supple muscles, so she did seem the type who would be mindful of such things.

“Okay, about the attackers then. I remember nothing beyond the first strike from behind. Do you know where they came from or where they went when they left?”

“…? It wasn’t toward the subway station. I think they ran off in the direction of some convoluted back alleys.”

“Were they on foot or did they have a vehicle?”

“I don’t know. They ran away on foot, but they might have had a vehicle waiting further on.”

“I was attacked with blunt weapons, but did do you remember what those were?”

“Hmm… I think one guy had some kind of stick. And one had a sock.”

“A sock?”

“It was long and stretched out. It was swollen like something was stuffed inside. Something to weigh down one end.”

This was going to be difficult. If they did not all use the same sort of weapon, I had less of a hint for my investigation.

If they had used weapons that not many people have such as stun guns or a special sort of baton, I might have been able to hunt them down based on the information alone.

I asked a few more questions, but did not receive much useful information. Partway through, I changed my tactic to seeing if Tomoe-chan was lying, but I saw nothing suspicious in her words or eye movements.

“Thank you very much.”

“…You’re welcome.”

“Just to be safe, you should probably stop your nighttime jogs for the time being. Do you mind if I tell your parents that as well?”

“Tell them whatever you want,” said Tomoe-chan while averting her gaze. She then added, “But I will not stop pursuing this

Jinmensou incident.”

“…”

Oh, come on.

Don’t you know that is much more dangerous than your nighttime jogs?

You’re looking right at a man who was beaten to a pulp over it.

“I can’t leave it to that person. I would just get an arbitrary promise and nothing would ever actually be done about it.”

“Um, you mentioned ‘that person’ before as well. Do you mean Hishigami Enbi-san?”

At their school, Tomoe-chan had told the mystery freak she would do this on her own because she could not trust a police detective.

But…

“Eh? Oh. No, no. It isn’t her. I have no reason to blame Enbi.”

“Then…”

“It doesn’t matter who it is,” cut in Tomoe-chan sharply. “But if you don’t know, that means Enbi really did keep quiet about it.”

“…”

Wait, wait, wait, wait.

This is starting to sound dangerous.

Not only was Hachikawa Tomoe-chan hiding something, but the mystery freak knew what it was. I had a feeling it would be dangerous to not get the information out of her here, but she was not a suspect. I could not forcibly interrogate her, so there was nothing I could do if she was not willing to tell me.

…I’ll get it out of the mystery freak later.

“Anyway, I will pursue this Jinmensou incident no matter what happens. Detective, you should not be wandering around with your injuries. You should get back to the hospital. Good night.”

Tomoe-chan then ran back into the apartment building. The lock activated, so I could not pursue her further.

“…Now then.”

What could I do now besides asking the mystery freak for information related to Hachikawa Tomoe?

The day before, the mystery freak had told me to check the list of people who used Kaguya Beauty Clinic and to look for a connection to the SNS murders from May.

It pained me to simply do what the mystery freak told me to do, but it was my best bet.

Part 11

But despite my attempt to look cool, the real world was not the same as a police drama in which any case could be solved in 60 minutes. In reality, the police were not blessed with an environment that allowed them to focus on a single case until it was solved. We often had to handle multiple cases in parallel and sometimes private problems that had no relation to the case got in the way as well.

And so at 7:30 that evening…

“Uchimaku, we’re going drinking tonight. You’re coming whether you like it or not.”

“What?”

As soon as I arrived back at work, the department chief, Mezu Gen, told me that with a stern expression. I could only stare at him in shock while still wrapped in bandages.

Needless to say, the department chief and I were not on friendly enough terms to go drinking together.

And regardless of how well we might get along, being asked to go drinking with your boss did not seem as if it would lead to a fun time.

The department chief must have had his own thoughts on the matter because the wrinkles of his usual stern expression grew threefold.

“Looking at your face while drinking is not my idea of a pleasant evening,” he said. “Chief Superintendent Mishima invited us. Refusing would affect both of our futures. If you understand, then get ready.”

“Wait!! That’s two ranks higher than superintendent! Why does someone like that have his eyes on someone unimportant like me!?”

Above a superintendent was a senior superintendent, and another step above that was the chief superintendent.

In terms of numbers, this was at a level even higher than billion or trillion. This was more like a number like googol that you could live your everyday life just fine without knowing about. That was how little in common there was between someone in a dead-end detective job like me and a senior superintendent or chief superintendent.

By the way, there were only two positions higher than chief superintendent.

“Because you did something that stood out enough for him to notice you. And don’t forget that it is thanks to you that I am caught in the middle of this.”

The department chief gave me a horrible glare as we boarded a taxi. The atmosphere in the taxi was so awkward the driver remained silent as he drove us to a residential district in Ningyocho. I had not known that high-cost area filled with office buildings had a residential district. And naturally (?) we stopped somewhere with no sign, main entrance, or parking lot. It did not even have the bare minimum of what one would expect of a bar. It looked like the sort of house you could see anywhere.

“Is this the chief superintendent’s house?”

“…That’s enough. Do not say anything more, Uchimaku.”

We entered what looked exactly like the small yard of a house, the department chief knocked on the back door, and a woman wearing a kimono answered.

“Mezu-sama, Uchimaku-sama. We were expecting you. Come in. Mishima-sama has already arrived.”

???

The woman in a kimono had a pin mic on her collar and an earphone in one ear. When she led us inside, the scenery completely changed. The building had looked like a small house from outside, but it was a small but luxurious Japanese-style bar inside. This limited space could likely rival the top floor of a resort hotel.

“…What is this place?”

“Did you think Ginza and Akasaka were as good as it gets? Only the nouveau riche get excited over that. In a world where people truly spare no expense, the bars do not have signs.”

The bar had a counter and a few tables, but it was empty except for a single customer at the counter. This was not because the place was doing poorly. Its prices were so ridiculously expensive, it could function with this alone.

That one person raised a hand.

“Hey, hey. Over here, over here. Sorry about the sudden invitation.”

He was Chief Superintendent Mishima.

A lowly detective like me would never have any chance to speak with someone like him even if we were in the same building. He was in his late thirties, but he looked like the perfect example of the bachelor living it up. He was of course older than me, but he must have looked like he had just learned to walk from the department chief’s perspective. The department chief was old-fashioned and had also always hated the elite, so there must have been a powerful force at play for him to be obeying without complaint.

Rising to chief superintendent by one’s late thirties was rare even in the elite Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. People like him tended to rise through the ranks quickly, but that alone was not enough to explain it.

That monster smiled and said, “C’mon, sit, sit. This is a bit of an odd bar that only serves cocktails with a sake base, so sorry about that. But they’re quite good if you give them a chance. It’s all on me, so drink as much as you want.”

Anyone who took up that offer in a high class bar that did not list a single price on its menu was most likely not a working member of society.

So why did the chief superintendent call us here?

But without giving any hint towards that answer, Chief Superintendent Mishima began some pointless small talk.

“Uchimaku-chan, I’ve heard you get along quite well with the middle school aged daughter of the Hishigami family.”

“Bh!?”

That’s the first thing you bring up!?

The department chief’s look grew even sterner, but the chief superintendent’s tone remained unconcerned.

“Oh, I’m not trying to find fault. In fact, that takes talent. *The Hishigami women invite disaster, after all*. It seems that is actually a rule in that family. Grabbing the reins of one of them and not being thrown off is quite a feat.”

“Wait…eh? What are you saying?”

“If you don’t understand, you don’t need to. Oh, right. We have been arguing over who to choose to be the next ‘police chief for a day’. You have a youthfulness to you that is popular with middle school girls, so who do you think it should be? Who are the popular idols right now?”

“I don’t know!! I can’t keep track of the names and faces of those idol units with dozens of members!!”

“Do you think Omikuji Maidens or Fortune Telling Girls would be better?”

“I think Seman[1] Stars would be best.”

The department chief glared at me, but what was a poor public servant like me supposed to do? If I had remained silent, he still would have glared at me!

After that, Chief Superintendent Mishima insisted that I try some sake-based cocktails that had been turned into psychedelic reds and blues. Those upside down triangle cocktail glasses could hold a larger volume than I thought.

I also spotted some junmai daiginjo made by my brother behind the counter.

They were named Red Yukata and Black-Haired Beauty, so he must have been fond of that Youkai despite how much she was afraid of him. Looking as frightening as him may have worked against him in some ways.

“You aren’t looking any different.”

“Oh. This is not enough to get me drunk.”

“That isn’t what I meant. Normally, when people are brought to this sort of bar and forced to drink this kind of expensive drink, they want to make informed comments even if they can't tell the difference from normal drinks. I used to do it myself."

Oh, that's what he means.

This may have been the very best the city had to offer, but I grew up in an Intellectual Village. After drinking entire cardboard boxes full of the finest Japanese sake in the country or even the world, I had lost all sense of its value.

In college, I had searched out the greatest hidden bars the city had to offer and found none of them could compare to the stuff back home, so I eventually gave up on caring about the quality of sake at all.

But sadly, it was not based on my skill, so I could not brag about it to anyone.

"Oh, right. Uchimaku-chan, I heard about your achievement in that convenience store robbery. You arrested the robber with no injuries or damage, right? It was the best conclusion for both the victim and the criminal."

Only a child would get excited over being praised here.

As an adult, I had to be extra careful of the department chief who had remained silent for a looooooooooong time now.

"Oh, um…sorry about all that."

"No, no. I don't mind. The regulations regarding that are there to allow the police to do their job as efficiently as possible. If you had waited for a police officer in that jurisdiction to arrive, someone might have been stabbed inside the convenience store," said Chief Superintendent Mishima with a big grin on his face. As an adult, I could sense something unsettling like the alcohol was sending him in a negative direction. "Uchimaku-chan, this shows that you have grown enough to instinctually sense what the purpose of a police officer is. *You do not need the rules to compensate for you.* That is something worth praising you for. But," added the chief superintendent to preface some sort of negation.

"The real system of society is much more severe than what you see in police dramas. You can only ignore the rules *when doing so will produce a better result than following the rules can.* For example, think about this convenience store robbery. Safely arresting the robber is fine, but what if your attempt had failed and your actions led to the clerk getting stabbed? Do you think we would cover for you then?"

"…"

"We would not. Police officers are only human, so they will sometimes fail in extreme life-or-death situations. They need to be rebuked in such situations, but they also need to be protected. If they are all too afraid of making a mistake to do anything, we could not protect the law and order of this country. But certain appearances need to be upheld while protecting the people of our organization. If you follow the rules and do everything right but do not make it in time, we can protect you. But if you break the rules and act on your own initiative and that leads to someone's death, we can do nothing to protect you. *Do you understand what I mean?*"

"…Yes."

"Good. Whether you know the risks or not makes a lot of difference. I will overlook it just this once. This may sound trite, but I have great hopes for you. Especially when it comes to cases related to Youkai. Otherwise I would not have set up this opportunity to speak with you."

I did not like the sound of having myself and Youkai linked together like that.

But as an adult, I made sure not to show it on my face.

"But you will find things more difficult in the future. The power of the police lies in the power of the organization. If you lose that power, you will be in much more danger than you realize. Keep that in mind."

After a few hours, I was released from that drinking party that left me with a stomachache.

The department chief had remained completely silent the entire time, but he spat out a comment as soon as we left the bar.

"That is not someone you want paying such close attention to you."

"…I know that all too well. If I was drawing a picture diary, today would probably be filled in completely black."

“I doubt a monster of that level would care about a simple detective. This may be a disaster brought on by that Hishigami girl, but be careful. Appearing ‘useful’ to the people at the top is not always a good thing.”

Part 12

When I went into work the next day, I entered the archives room to view the files I had been unable to view the day before. The area was crowded with steel racks which were all filled with thick clear file folders of case records. A lot of them were unsolved, so the mystery freak might have drooled if she saw this collection.

Most of the data was searchable by computer, but some records were abbreviated or changed slightly in format or presentation in the process of digitization. The best method was to check the computer first and then check the physical reports for the details. I had not written all of the reports for this case.

The May SNS murders.

The case had not been called that from the beginning. For one thing, it had not been a murder case initially.

We simply had some strange suicides with no apparent motive.

As they were investigated, it turned out all of the people had used a certain major SNS service. The incident had produced five “suicides” in a single month and had spread to many different areas through the wide range of people’s online connections.

As you might imagine, it had been a complete pain in the ass dealing with different police stations fighting over whose jurisdiction it fell under. Fortunately, it had not spread overseas.

The victims had ranged from elementary school age to high school age. At the time, they had been judged isolated suicides due to people “flaming” the opinions the kids posted online. They had gathered attention as proof of how modern society was lowering the age at which children committed suicide.

Ultimately, digging into the suspicious aspects turned up a group at a prestigious private university and four people were arrested. Once that happened, the talk shows began covering it as a demonic murder spree by candidates for the upper levels of elite corporations.

The mystery freak had told me to go over that case once more.

But not much about it was still suspicious. We already knew how they had disguised the murders as jumping suicides and how they had used other victims' accounts to contact them.

The only thing left was…

"The motive."

When questioned, the four arrested had given nothing but ridiculous statements. Some people said they were trying to get a psychiatric examination to lessen their punishment and other people said they were following the disturbing logic of twisted elites. But those four had found a stable and successful means of killing people and no one had found a clear answer as to why.

Was it related to this Jinmensou case?

To be honest, I was doubtful.

But when I compared to the documents on the Kaguya Beauty Clinic and the SNS murders, I did find some odd information.

"…A few names show up in both."

Some students had been involved in both cases.

But the SNS used had been a popular one, so the number of related individuals was quite large.

It was not too surprising to find a few of those had also used Kaguya Beauty Clinic. And yet…

The SNS and the Jinmensou.

As I puzzled over the two cases, my cell phone rang.

It was from the mystery freak.

"Hah hah hah. Have you arrived at the truth yet, detective?"

"I feel like an idiot for worrying when I realized you were near the scene of the attack."

"H-huh? You mean I could have grabbed at your heart by pretending to have been attacked?"

It won't work if you just pretend.

Not that I want you to actually get attacked for that reason.

“You’re hiding something about Hachikawa Tomoe, aren’t you? If something happens because of that, I will officially blame you.”

“This involves her privacy, so I wanted her permission. But whatever. Let’s meet for a chat. Detective, you were attacked despite my warning. You clearly need all the help you can get, so I’ll lend you a hand.”

“You said the SNS murders and this Jinmensou case are linked, right? I’ve found a few common names between the two, but…”

“I’ll tell you about that as well. Just compare the two cases. Don’t the structures seem similar?”

“?”

“The SNS murders killed people while making it look like they committed suicide over the flaming on their page. The Jinmensou case uses a giant tumor to isolate the target from their school life. …Do you see the common theme?”

“…Ostracism.”

“That’s right. Isolation from an organization or group. Detective, you thought the masterminds of the SNS murders were those four elite candidates from that prestigious private university, *but it may have gone deeper than that.*”

“…”

And now the person controlling it from the shadows was using someone else for this new case. Was that why the Jinmensou case showed hints of being similar to the SNS murders?

“If that is true, this is a big deal.”

“It already is a big deal. You can’t say you don’t know what happened to you. At any rate, we can discuss this further when we meet. This is something that needs to be discussed in person.”

Part 13

That evening, I met up with the mystery freak in an unpopular café in Ochanomizu.

“You’re late.”

“Oh, am I?”

I walked over to the mystery freak’s table in the back and sat down. As always, she had chosen a café with ridiculously long-named items on the menu, but this time I pointed at something random and ordered it.

“Let’s cut to the chase. How exactly is the solved SNS murders case linked to the current Jinmensou case?”

“Let’s start with the hidden side of the SNS murders.”

The mystery freak pulled out a smartphone with a leather cover that made it look like a memo pad.

She placed it on the table and said, “On the surface, the victim’s page was flamed to make their murder look like a suicide. But you know that of course.”

“Wait, wait. On the surface?”

“Evidence has turned up that the flaming itself was intentionally created by a different group. In other words, the criminals did not want to target the people who were flamed. They attacked those people because someone else flamed them.”

“…So they had some other purpose?”

“Question: what do the five victims of the SNS murders have in common?”

“Their ages and locations were all different.”

“They were students from elementary school age to high school age.” The mystery freak called up a few documents on her smartphone. “The four from the prestigious private university did the actual crime, a few others handled the flaming, and some leader controlled it all. Now, were these murders based on an abnormal motive that normal people cannot understand? If so, *would the other members of the organization have been able to understand the motive either?*”

Most serial killers worked alone because abnormal motives could not be shared.

There were different categories of murderers, but different people would not get along and cooperate in abnormal murders just because they fit the same category.

Which meant…

“Is this not an issue of individual ideology? Did the entire group gain something from this? …Like money maybe?”

Desire for money was the most obvious common factor between people. Unlike with serial killings, it was easy to see several people working together to rob a bank.

However…

“All of the victims were minors. I doubt they had much money and they had no life insurance. What did the entire group gain from killing those five?”

“I came up short there too. No matter how much I researched the victims, I could not find anything.” Enbi displayed a new document on her smartphone. “Which is why we need to think about this differently. What the criminals gained *came from someone other than the victims.*”

“…What?”

“Look at this. You should get it right away.”

Enbi pointed at the smartphone in the middle of the table and I looked down at it.

The screen was small so the smaller text was difficult to read, but I was able to read large headline right away.

Child Board Meeting Plan.

“…………………………………………………

As I read the details, I could feel my mind growing blank.

…*What is this?*

"The Child Board Meeting. To put it simply, it's a plan to influence the children of the management and stockholders of large corporations. Those powerful adults cannot be influenced by external pressure. But what about their children? Someone who knows how to use the internet has control of the 'general consensus' on the SNS. They can ostracize a specific target by thoroughly flaming them. *By creating an environment that harms their children, they can indirectly influence and control the adults in the corporations.* That is the Child Board Meeting."

"But can't the parents just keep their kids away from the SNS once the problems begin?"

"Those information tools are already a part of school life, detective. Information is just as necessary to them as water and oxygen. If they do not take part, they will be isolated. If they do no reply, they will be ostracized. And no matter how powerful their parents may be, their power is of no use in the closed environment of a school. But if they know their precious child is being ostracized in that 'holy ground' where adults have no influence, what options are left to them?"

I see.

One was a case of using the information services making up another side of school life to freely isolate a chosen target. The other used the physical effects of a Jinmensou to alter the social standing of the target. Looking at it that way, they were very similar at the core.

"But isn't that banned under deceptive obstruction of business laws?"

"Maybe. But even with rules punishing obvious violence and bullying in schools, limited actions carried out within the range of groups of friends may not be stopped. That is why parents and teachers tell kids to choose their friends carefully. Seeing something directly is one thing, but distant whispers of people abetting in a crime is unlikely to lead to legal restrictions."

"But that isn't a system for murdering the children. In fact, they would want it to spread below the surface without causing too much trouble.”

“The SNS plan did not work well. They may have influenced a few people, but a few children chose to oppose them without bothering their parents with it. They were of course ostracized as a result. Both on the SNS and at their actual school. I suspect some of those children approached the truth in their desperate resistance. And the criminal group needed to quickly eliminate those clever children.”

“…And they disguised it as suicide, hm? The suicides stood out because of their ages, but they camouflaged it with the false motive of ‘flaming’ because adults would not really understand it. Even if they had tried to tell someone something important before they died, people would assume they felt so cornered due to more childish reasons.”

“This data,” the mystery freak tapped the side of her smartphone, “is based on what I found on a page separate from the SNS. I have confirmed the details with other sources. It seems it was gathered by the ostracized children as they tried to follow the movements of suspicious information.”

“It looks like those four from the prestigious private university were working for someone else. Do you know who that was?”

“No. The children were all eliminated in the SNS murders before they made it that far.” The mystery freak sighed. “But I think the Jinmensou case is being done for the same reasons. You should go back and look into the family of the girl who tried to rob that convenience store. You should find a manager of a corporation, a large shareholder, or someone else who holds power.”

We did not know how large this criminal group was, but if they were trying to slowly manipulate the financial activities of the country with simultaneous attacks on multiple large corporations, they were likely quite large.

It was possible something on the level of *a large criminal organization* was behind it.

“This is a tough one.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Now I see why you are so interested in the Jinmensou case despite only caring about corpses. It’s connected to the SNS, so you could say that murder case isn't over yet."

"You're making me blush."

"Why would that make you blush? And how does the rest of this fit in?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why is Hachikawa Tomoe-chan pursuing this case? She saw me beaten up right in front of her. She should know the risks all too well. Also, she seems to dislike the police and keeps mentioning some mysterious person. How does all of that fit in?"

"Oh." The mystery freak let out a small groan. "I did not want to get into more uncertain information. This is all on Tomoe's word alone. I have not confirmed any of it, so do not simply accept it as true."

"?"

"Tomoe says her neighbor is being affected by a Jinmensou. The girl's name is Tsumada Mio. She is also in middle school, but I have never met her because she goes to a different school."

If that was true, I might be able to find something that led to the heart of this case. After all, I had not met many people directly related to the case. The high school girl from the convenience store robbery was the only other one.

But…

"We can't speak with her. It seems she has disappeared and no one can find her."

"…She's gone missing?"

She had gotten involved in a crime related to the group behind the SNS murders and then went missing. The situation looked quite serious.

"That part is a bit unclear. She might have simply run away from home or she might just be hiding in her apartment. Also," the mystery freak raised her index finger, "the timing is a bit odd."

"The timing?"

"Tsumada Mio fell victim to the Jinmensou during April of this year. Yet the other cases we know of were recent. In fact, the SNS murders had not even come to the surface at that time."

What is going on?

While Jinmensou were rare, they were still a type of Youkai. It was entirely possible Tsumada Mio had just so happened to develop one with no relation to this case.

Or…

"April is when the class change happens. It is possible Tsumada Mio simply made some mistake during all that and ended up holing up at home. Her worried parents could have later heard about the Jinmensou incidents and decided she was a victim of it too," said the mystery freak.

"But this isn't an Intellectual Village; it's the capital of Japan. Youkai hate modern cities, so I doubt one would naturally appear here."

"We have never actually seen Tsumada Mio. We have no way of knowing if she actually has a Jinmensou or not. She may have started wearing more clothes to cover her skin, but that could always have been due to a scratch unrelated to the Jinmensou. Right?"

"…"

I could not say she was wrong.

After all, we had too little information.

"Then let's go check. We just need to gather enough information to say for sure."

"?"

"If Tsumada Mio has been reported missing and it turns out she is actually holed up at home, her parents will be guilty of a false police report or falsifying public documents. …It's a bit of a forceful method, but I can use suspicion of that to get some information out of the family."

"You can do that if you want, but won't you get in trouble if it fails?”

“I’d definitely get a pay cut,” I said decisively. “But it is possible Tsumada Mio will become a victim similar to the victims of the SNS murders. If we find out she is unrelated, that is fine by me. At any rate, we need to take a step forward.”

Part 14

And it failed splendidly.

Despite showing up in the evening, Tsumada Mio's parents led me to the empty girl's room. It seemed the report of her having gone missing in April was accurate. The room was attentively cleaned, but showed no sign of being lived in.

"It may be a problem to hear this, but we are not all that worried," said Tsumada Mio's father with a slightly sad smile. "She has always been good at grasping how things work. She is probably making use of some structure of society to provide herself with a new place to live."

"…Do you mind if I look through any notes or memos of hers?"

"No, but the…what was it? Life safety? Anyway, the group that deals with children already went over it."

"Just to be sure."

I looked around the room while taking a mental note to ask Toujou-san or someone else from the Life Safety Division for the data later.

It was a stereotypical room with a desk, a bed, and a bookshelf. But it seemed lacking in entertainment. I could see almost no electronics. Not only did it not have a TV, but it had no audio equipment either.

When I pointed that out, the father scratched his head and said, "I do not know what it is called, but she had one of those things that is about the size of a notebook. The ones you use your fingers directly on the screen with."

"A tablet computer?"

"Yes, that's it. She used it for both movies and manga."

"Do you know where that tablet is?"

"Mio-chan took it with her."

That was too bad.

That may have been why I could not find a school bag despite seeing plenty of textbooks.

If she used it that heavily, it was probably filled with personal information and information on her friends.

If she kept her data on the cloud, I might be able to access it via the internet provider, but teenagers like her tended to be more sensitive about personal information than adults. If she had kept the cloud setting off, it would be impossible to reach the tablet's data.

I ended up just checking through what was in the room.

I found a notepad with a ton of small photo stickers on it, but I doubted it would help me find where she had gone. I could check who the people in the photos were, but the Life Safety Division would have already done that. And they were probably just friends from school.

There were a lot of the photo stickers and she was photographed with both boys and girls. Given how many of them there were, I doubted they were all from just one class. Either her social network extended beyond just her class or she was involved in clubs or the student council.

From what I could see, I doubted she had made some huge mistake during the class change in April like the mystery freak had suggested. She seemed like the type who would make herself the center of the class wherever she ended up.

"Okay, this might be painful to think back on, but did anything about your daughter change just before she disappeared?"

"What?"

"For example, did she suddenly start wearing stockings or tights as if to hide her skin?"

"Now that you mention it," muttered Tsumada Mio's father.

For the convenience store robbery girl, it had been on the thigh. Even so, it was too soon to assume it always appeared on the thigh. But still…

"She started wearing the bottom of a track suit below the skirt of her school uniform. I told her to stop because it was indecent, but she said it was popular in her class."

It seemed I needed to check the school she went to.

"By any chance did you ever see below those pants?"

"Of course not. That would be below her skirt. She is hardly the age to be bathing with her father. I doubt even my wife would know."

In the end, all I knew was that Tsumada Mio had started to hide her legs before she went missing. The situation would change greatly depending on whether there had actually been a Jinmensou there or not.

"No, wait a second," said the father suddenly.

"What is it?"

"I never saw Mio-chan's legs, but I know someone who might have."

"Who is that?"

Someone who would have seen her thighs below a miniskirt? Her boyfriend maybe?

However, my guess was wrong.

"Her school had a physical examination just before she went missing. It is possible the health teacher saw her legs."

I used my cell phone to call Tsumada Mio's school.

Given the time, most of the faculty had left the school already, but when I explained this was related to a police investigation, I was eventually connected to the teacher in question.

The middle-aged female voice told me, "Y-yes. Tsumada Mio-san had a large tumor in the shape of a human face on her right thigh."

Part 15

“Bingo.” I met up with the mystery freak after leaving the apartment. “In April, before the SNS murders in May, Tsumada Mio already had a Jinmensou.”

“Just to be sure, is it possible the health teacher was lying?”

“It’s possible, but this makes sense.”

“What do you mean?”

“Her personal notepad was covered in small photo stickers, so she must have had a lot of friends. She was popular. So why did she disappear in April during the class change? She wouldn’t have had any complaints about her school life.”

“What if she did not disappear of her own free will?”

“Or her position in the school changed once the Jinmensou was discovered during the physical examination in April.”

Enbi frowned slightly.

“But she defended against it by wearing the track suit pants below her skirt, right? I doubt she would have let it be revealed so easily. Couldn’t she have come up with a reason to delay her examination until after school when everyone else was gone?”

“At the very least, the health teacher knew about the Jinmensou,” I said calmly. “But people are not perfect. The teacher might have told someone.”

“…That would have been terrible,” groaned the mystery freak in a low voice.

As someone at the same sensitive age, she may have been able to more clearly imagine what a tragedy that would have been.

“We still do not know if this Jinmensou is the same as the ones related to the incident connecting back to the SNS murders. But we can explain it if it is.”

“How?”

"As a test case. The criminals are trying to ostracize any child from their school with a Jinmensou. That way they can manipulate their parents who are managers or large shareholders. If they fail, they make an enemy of adults with a lot of power. In that case, they would want to test it out beforehand. *They would want to prove they could ostracize even the most popular kid in a class.*"

"The SNS murders did not come to light until May, but the trouble that prevented them from manipulating the adults must have happened before that. And once the SNS plan failed, the criminal group would have prepared for their next project."

"And after they proved they could ostracize a popular kid with a Jinmensou, they prepared to use it on a larger scale…which is what we are seeing now."

"Wait." The mystery freak placed a hand on her chin. "So in Tsumada Mio's case, they had yet to fully establish their Jinmensou Package, right? They would not have deemed it a success just by viewing her from a distance. They might have made a slight mistake and left some hint to the person behind all this."

"Or Tsumada Mio might have seen something herself."

Either way, it seemed Tsumada Mio's circumstances were different from the other victims. And even if that was not the case, I still needed to find a way to protect her and soon. Given the circumstances, I was not easygoing enough to optimistically think she had simply run away from home and would be back eventually.

"I'm heading back into work. I want to go through the data the Life Safety Division gathered on her. Mystery freak, what will you do?"

"I want to go into the Metropolitan Police Department with you."

"It's too late for a field trip."

"Then I will try to track down Tsumada Mio on my own. I don't know how far I can get, though."

"Do as you wish."

"Don't forget that you were attacked yesterday. Detective, you are probably still standing in a very hot position."

And then we heard a footstep.

The mystery freak and I turned around to find Hachikawa Tomoe-chan. She was wearing stylish sportswear and spats, but I had no idea if that was the uniform of her school or a teen brand. I had forgotten she was Tsumada Mio's neighbor. If she was out now, she may have moved her night jogs to the evening.

Or perhaps she was attempting to track down Tsumada Mio as well.

The mystery freak tried to keep her voice as tender as possible as she spoke.

"Tomoe."

"I will not stop," cut in Tomoe-chan. "I will not stop no matter what. …Detective, do not become the same as that person."

After spitting out that comment, she disappeared into the apartment building.

In the end, I forgot to ask Hachikawa Tomoe-chan who "that person" was.

Part 16

Fortunately, I was not beaten up on the streets two days in a row.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department was a government office, so it of course had set work hours. However, the type of work we did meant it had almost no limits on overtime. For serious cases such as serial killers, it was common to work 70 hours straight and seeing people napping with a blanket on the floor was not unusual.

But the place was still mostly empty in the middle of the night.

All of the lights were off in the building and it was covered in the same eeriness as a hospital after lights out.

Inside, Toujou-san from the Life Safety Division said, “It’s a good thing you caught me before I left.”

“Sorry about this.”

“You needed the investigation data on Tsumada Mio, right? That case is not being treated with any importance. We deemed it to be a girl running away from home of her own free will. We investigated the Tsumada household with the family’s consent, but we did not find much.”

“It seems she had quite a lot of friends, so could she have gone to a friend’s house when she ran away?”

“No. It seems something happened to Tsumada Mio just before she disappeared. We decided she ran away because her social standing in school collapsed. I doubt she would have relied on someone from school.”

“Um, I saw her notepad and it had quite a lot of photo stickers on it. Would all of those people really have turned against her?”

“Some people just want to see someone popular fall. Having a lot of friends does not say anything about the strength or depth of those friendships.”

“…”

Then where did Tsumada Mio disappear to?

Four months had passed since then. I doubted a kid could rent an apartment just by saving up her allowance. Not to mention that she would need a guarantor to sign the contract.

Was she using a facility like an internet café? Or had she pretended to be in high school to get a part-time job?

I could come up with a few ideas, but none of them seemed realistic. She was a middle school girl. At that age, she was supposed to be protected by her parents or another guardian. If she was forcing herself to live independently, she would stand out enough for a uniformed police officer or someone else to notice.

"I heard Tsumada Mio disappeared with her tablet computer. Did you check the GPS?"

"All of those obvious functions were turned off. She hasn't been communicating using it at all. We have been sharing information with other police stations, but have found nothing. Okay, I've sent the data related to Tsumada Mio to your computer. If you want more accurate data, head to the archives room. The number is…"

After jotting down the number, I bowed in thanks to Toujou-san once more.

"Sorry about keeping you for so long."

"It's fine, it's fine. I can still just barely make the last train. Tell me now if you need anything else. If I have to turn around again, you're paying for my taxi. Got it?"

Toujou-san then quickly left the dimly lit floor.

Now that I was truly alone, I turned toward my computer.

I did not care how trivial it was.

I just wanted any kind of hint I could find that would lead me to Tsumada Mio.

"…"

I scrolled through the information for a bit, but none of it stood out to me. It included some personal information I had not known, but I could have found any of it on my own if I had taken the time.

But…

"…Huh?"

After a bit of scrolling, the text grew corrupted. The attached image files were so corrupted I could not tell what they were supposed to show.

Had they been damaged during the transmission process?

I turned toward the hallway, but Toujou-san had likely already left the building. And he had said he would just barely make the last train. I could not bring myself to call him back now.

Fortunately, he had told me the file number ahead of time.

"I guess I have to check the paper files in the archives room…"

I walked down the hallway and put some change into a vending machine selling breads with different foods inside. Food and drink were not allowed in the archives room, so I ate a korokke bread before continuing on my way.

The building was empty enough in the middle of the night, but I truly was the only person in the archives room. I walked along the metal shelves lined up like in a library and pulled out the clear file folder I needed. I carried that giant folder with me and sat down at a reading desk.

I used the narrow field of light from a desk lamp to read through the text.

It detailed the information regarding the investigation of Tsumada Mio's disappearance. It listed the date of her disappearance as well as various details about her before and after her disappearance: what she had said and done, her relationship with her friends, any sightings of her, how much money she was thought to have, etc. However, none of it seemed it would help me.

How had she lived during the four months since her disappearance?

And where was she now?

"I guess this is all they'll have for a disappearance with no hint of foul play," I muttered out loud.

The police would not treat a simple disappearance as an important incident. And when it looked so much like she had voluntarily run away from home due to her personal circumstances, not much would be done. Her information would be sent to the police around the country and we would hope one of them would find her.

“Hm?”

As I reflected on that fact, something seemed off to me.

I lifted the thick file folder up a bit. It was quite heavy. The report was at least as thick as a dictionary.

But why?

Cases of runaway girls were fairly common, so why had such a thick folder been created for Tsumada Mio’s case?

I was confused.

But I was not given enough time to find an answer.

With a loud zapping noise, an arm circled around from behind and pressed a torn electric cord against the center of my chest.

“Gah…gh…!?”

I heard a loud thud. It was the sound I made when I collapsed from my chair. My vision had been turned sideways, but I could see someone looking down at me from above.

Is this person…insane? Murdering someone…inside the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department…!?

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s fairly common for police officers to kill themselves inside the police department. Although they almost always use a handgun.” The speaker seemed to be grinning. “Also, I doubt this will be enough to kill you. Most people who try to commit suicide outside of their home will prepare multiple tools in case the first one does not finish the job properly. …And sometimes they will persuade a decent normal person to help.”

When I heard the person’s voice, I finally figured out what was going on.

The corrupted information…on Tsumada Mio…was not a mistake… It was a trap…to lure me…out to the archives room…!!

"Tou…jou… Toujou…!!"

Strength was gradually returning to my arms and legs, but would he give me the few minutes I needed to recover? Toujou pulled something out of his suit pocket. It was a fruit knife inside a plastic sheath. It was neatly packaged in a plastic bag to keep it from catching on the fabric of his clothes.

"When making a murder look like suicide, it's important not to make any wounds on the hands that look like they were made in defense. But don't worry. The investigation will show you stabbed yourself in the throat after the electric cord did not kill you."

He sounds so delighted!!

Since he was trying to kill me, Toujou was most certainly related to the SNS murders and the Jinmensou. When I thought back, I realized Toujou had been involved in the investigation of the "group of boys" who attacked me, the search of the beauty clinic, and the search for Tsumada Mio.

He had been in the perfect position to limit the information found to keep the investigations from getting anywhere.

The SNS murders had grown to such a large scale that Investigation Department 1 had been called in. They may have kept the Jinmensou incident on such a small scale to make sure it remained within Toujou's Life Safety Division.

Yet I had taken action this time too.

And I was the one who had put an end to the SNS murders.

Was that why?

"…Toujou…kh…!!"

"You keep calling me Toujou, *but who exactly do you mean by that?*"

I did not know what he meant.

The person trying to kill me was most certainly the Toujou I knew.

"If you think I am Toujou Miyabi of the Life Safety Division, you are wrong. He happened to share the same family name as me, so it was easier to switch out with him. The real one is buried in a mountain somewhere."

That bastard!!

"And if you think I am a pawn of those behind the SNS murders and the Jinmensou, you are wrong again. Do not put me in the same category as that pathetic organization that can't even assemble one little Package. Did you really think I was a pawn of that insider group that thinks they're such intellectuals? …What I am interested in is the *bug* they accidentally created." Toujou smiled while pulling the fruit knife out of its plastic sheath. "I will find Tsumada Mio. I will use her in a much more wonderful way than they would have. So, well, just give up. The pain will be gone soon."

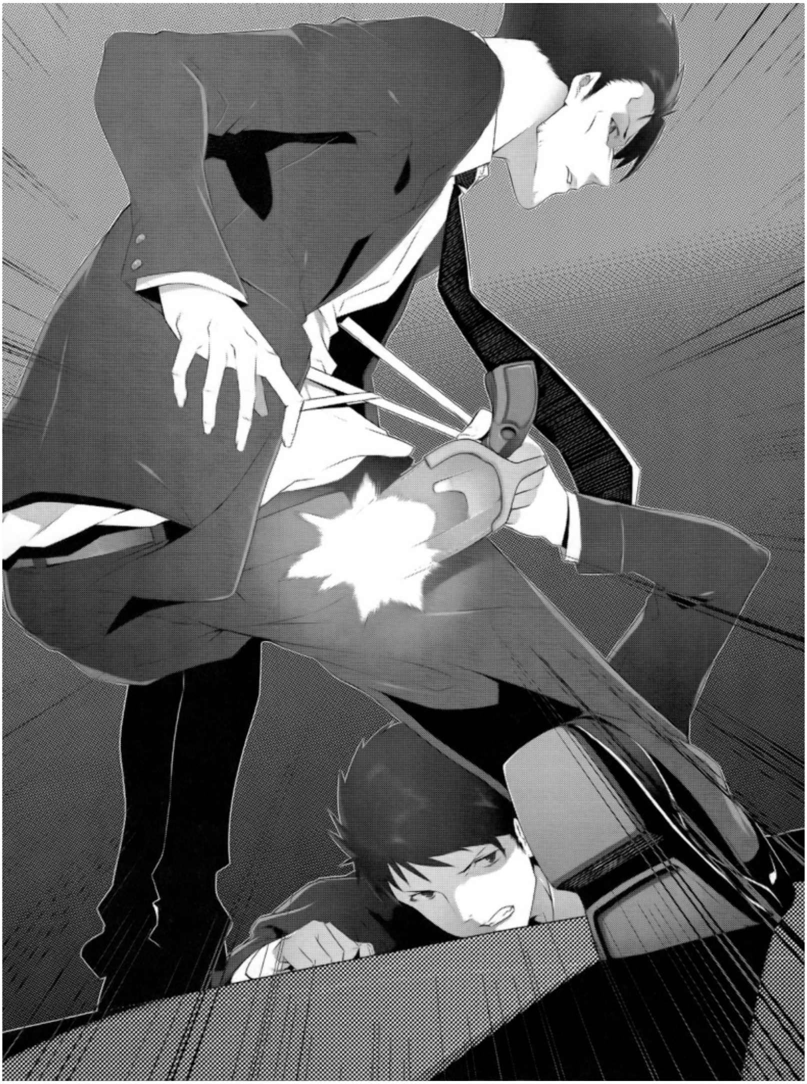
In the end…

His mistake was in crouching down so he could put the blade in my hand. He either failed to follow his duty as a police officer or had never been one to begin with, so he gave me what I needed for my counterattack.

I was able to move my arms and legs a bit, but I was still not strong enough to support my body's weight and sit up.

I somehow managed to reach my arm out toward Toujou's belt as he crouched down before me.

I found what I was looking for. It was near his right pants pocket.



Hey, Toujou. Real police detectives don't carry their guns around everywhere like on TV.

If you acted more like the real deal, you wouldn't have to worry about this!!

In the next instant, several dry gunshots rang out.

"…!!"

With the gun still in its holster, I had removed the safety and pulled the trigger. The bullets strayed too far to the side to injure Toujou, but it still gave him quite a shock. He had been kneeling down near me in order to safely falsify the evidence, but he suddenly moved away from me.

“Gh…!!” I groaned while still unable to stand up.

My face was covered in sweat, but I did not have time to wipe it away.

“O-oh, c’mon. Are you an idiot? At least use a .38.”

After making sure the gun was still in its holster, anger filled Toujou’s face.

He unhesitatingly held up the fruit knife.

“Uchimaku!!”

“If you’re gonna do it, then do it. But everyone in the building will have heard those gunshots. Whoever’s on guard duty will be here before long. 30 seconds maybe?” I sneered at him from the floor. “You can kill me easily enough, but can you dispose of the body? If you can’t, you’re going down with me.”

“Tch!!”

Toujou made up his mind quickly.

He turned back on the safety of his holstered handgun, kicked open the door to the archives room, and ran out. But even if it was the middle of the night, this was the headquarters of Tokyo’s law enforcement. He would not get away that easily.

Not long afterwards, a few uniformed police officers ran into the archives room.

“Hey, why did it take you three minutes to get here?”

“Wh-what happened?” asked the men while looking around at the obvious signs of a struggle and the walls with bullet holes in them.

It seemed I had put a large burden on myself by forcing myself to act as soon as I had. A wave of nausea belatedly hit me and I tried to force it down as I spoke to the men.

“Attempted murder is what happened. Put out a notification for the arrest of Toujou Miyabi…or someone using that name.”

Part 17

I went back over the information in my mind.

Someone was working behind the scenes of a single incident that connected the SNS murders and this Jinmensou incident. While investigating Tsumada Mio's disappearance to uncover this person, the Life Safety Division detective named Toujou Miyabi had attacked me.

But it seemed he did not belong to the organization behind the Jinmensou.

When talking about Tsumada Mio, he had not been interested in the Youkai-related Package but in a bug created by an adjustment error. The details were unclear, but Toujou Miyabi saw some form of meaning in the bug that Tsumada Mio had become and had therefore taken her from the Jinmensou group.

Now then.

"I was the one attacked, so why am I the one in an interrogation room while that bastard Toujou is still walking free?"

I tried to remain calm, but it made no logical sense.

Just as I angrily kicked at the table screwed to the floor, the interrogation room door opened. Mezu Gen entered. He was the department chief for Investigation Department 1.

"You caused quite a commotion."

"I think you mean I had one forced onto me."

"I cannot believe there were gunshots in the middle of Tokyo's law enforcement headquarters. And with a .45 caliber which is not the caliber of the handgun you are issued. …We could not find the gun in question, so where did it go?"

"I was the one that fired it, but its owner left with it."

Dammit, Toujou. How did you manage to escape from somewhere as strict as this?

The department chief sighed and his face grew even more wrinkled than usual.

“Investigator Toujou Miyabi left the building over 2 hours ago. And he was not found anywhere in the building at the time. Keep in mind that all of the entrances and exits were sealed the instant those gunshots were heard. What do you make of this situation?”

“He told me the real Toujou Miyabi is buried in a mountain somewhere. What am I supposed to make of that?”

“Uchimaku.” The department chief spoke my name to cut me off. “Think about how I feel when I am woken up and have to head back into work after the last train to deal with a subordinate’s scandal. If you keep up this nonsense, I will snap your neck. Let us speak frankly. I have never liked your jokes. I was being honest with you. Now, be honest with me.”

“Do you think I snuck a .45 caliber handgun past the strict security here to fire wildly into the walls of the archives room? Why would I do that!? What do I gain from that!? Do you seriously believe I did that, department chief!?”

“That is not what I am talking about. No matter how unreasonable it seems, if the evidence at the scene says you are guilty, you are guilty. That is how the system works. So, Uchimaku, clearing your name will be quite difficult. Someone from Department 1 will not have a fun time in jail. Just because you are a former detective, does not mean you will be given a private room.”

“Toujou Miyabi – or someone using his name – used an electric cord to shock me in the archives room. He was about to stab me with a fruit knife to make it look like suicide. I fired the handgun in Toujou’s holster to escape my predicament. Toujou fled with the gun still in his possession. No matter what anyone says, that is the truth!!”

“Uchimaku.”

“He said something about finding special value in Tsumada Mio who he called a bug in a Package! The Jinmensou organization was trying to do something with her, but he said he would steal her from them!! We cannot waste time here. If you insist on restraining me, at least send someone else to search for Tsumada Mio!!”

“…Uchimaku.”

The department chief brought a hand to his forehead and let out a heavy sigh.

He then spoke to me in such a low voice that I could barely hear him.

“I do not often feel like this. It feels like I am rushing down a set of invisible rails. It feels like I am acting according to the plans of someone I have never seen. I am aware of that.”

“…?”

“But I have never seen anyone reach a happy ending when they try to force their way off of those rails. Some are unnaturally demoted, some are driven insane, and some suddenly disappear or commit suicide. This is not an interrogation room. *It is a set of rails telling us to waste our time.* Making a mistake here will lead to a horrible fate. You need to understand that first.”

“Department chief!! Do you really think I am someone who would back away from a case for my own saf-…!?”

I shouted back at the department chief, but he reached over the table and grabbed my collar.

He then pulled with tremendous strength.

But he then whispered in my ear so quietly that it could not be recorded or seen on a video.

“I am never able to reach the truth. I can only send people like you out to find it.”

“Wha-…?”

“So when I see people like you, I get the urge to tell you the following: whatever you choose, always weigh the risks before choosing.” He paused for a moment. “But your life belongs to you. How you act now is your own decision.”

Strength left the hands holding my collar.

I dropped back down into my seat.

A slight silence fell over the interrogation room.

I slowly placed my hands on the table.

And then I forcefully stood up.

“I have been telling you what I want to do this whole time.”

Some problems were beyond solving. For example, there had been an isolated island filled with hunting weaponry where every single one of the hundreds of villagers was the murderer. But I had a chance of resolving this before it reached that level.

I had always been afraid of the look in the department chief’s eyes, but now I stared him directly at him.

I could stare him in the eye now.

“There is still a lot I do not know about the goals of the Jinmensou organization or this person going by the name Toujou Miyabi. But the odds are very high that they intend to do harm to Tsumada Mio. I will find her before they do and protect her. I will not let her become one of the dead who I find so uninteresting. Please let me do this.”

“Is there any chance you will change your mind?”

“I have no reason to change my mind.”

“Fine then.” The department chief slowly stood up. “No matter what assignments I give to the other detectives, you will be stopped somewhere. I will arrange a means for you to leave from here.”

“…How?”

“Do you really have time to worry about that? Until you arrest Toujou Miyabi and clear your name, you will be viewed as a dangerous criminal who fired inside the headquarters of the Tokyo police. …Uchimaku, do you remember Chief Superintendent Mishima?”

“The guy who set up that painful night of drinking?”

“Yes, that monster who should have nothing to do with the likes of us. He is neither an evil man nor a good man. In other words, he does not go easy on his enemies or his allies. He is the sort of person who would deem it an appropriate response to shoot you in a situation such as this. Do you understand what I am saying? If you do not want to be shot by your own colleagues, you must escape Tokyo as quickly as possible.”

Part 18

I have no idea what kind of connections or influence he used, but the department chief led me out of the interrogation room. We headed to the underground parking lot where the usual guard from the front entrance was waiting.

“Nakada-san?”

“Over here. Use this scooter. Here’s the key.”

But isn’t this Nakada-san’s? I’m about to be an escaped dangerous criminal who fired a handgun in the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, so won’t it be a lot of trouble for him if I use his scooter?

The department chief must have sensed my concern because he said, “It will of course be treated as stolen. This will increase your list of crimes, but do not worry about it too much.”

“…I see.”

How much of a villain am I becoming on paper?

I put on the borrowed helmet while thinking seriously about the situation.

Nakada-san then added, “Oh, and this is my cell phone. Use it however you wish. Don’t forget to turn your own phone off. Take this handgun, baton, and handcuffs as well. I took them from the storage room.”

“…”

Wait, wait, wait!! I’m about to be treated as a dangerous criminal who fired in the middle of the police department and then escaped the interrogation room. If I’m carrying this around, won’t I end up shot by a Special Assault Team!?

And I’m pretty sure that look on the department chief’s face is saying “I didn’t tell you to go that far”!

“Uchimaku, a search across Tokyo is sure to begin soon. Focus on driving safely. Avoid the major roads. Be especially careful when crossing rivers. All the roads focus in on the bridges, so they make excellent checkpoint locations."

"U-understood."

"Uchimaku-san, good luck. We cannot leave the rails, so please show that the justice the police claim to protect does indeed exist. That is likely what this missing girl needs the most."

"That was my plan from the beginning," I said before opening up the scooter's throttle and shooting out of the underground parking lot.

Midnight had already passed and the trains were no longer running. Tokyo had long been called the nightless city, but the government district of Sakuradamon had relatively little light and was wrapped in darkness.

I could no longer rely on the organization known as the police.

I needed some other power to search out Toujou Miyabi and Tsumada Mio who he was after.

"I almost feel like I've already lost…"

For the time being, I stopped the scooter near the entrance of a park and operated Tanaka-san's cell phone with my thumb. I was of course calling the twintailed mystery freak, Hishigami Enbi.

Before I could explain anything, she said, "Since you're using a different number, is this an emergency?"

"Pretty much. I am about to be a wanted man around the country. But what I must do remains the same. I need to find out everything I can about Tsumada Mio so I can find her. I need your help."

"Oh, I see… Well, fine. You owe me one, though. A big one. Be prepared to at least give me a swimsuit oil massage."

"Don't say such indecent things to a police officer!!"

"What are you talking about? Oil massages are good for your health and beauty. They aren't indecent at all."

Dammit.

I could almost see her grinning face.

“Anyway, where are you?” she asked.

“Sakuradamon.”

“Then you can use my base in Kudanshita. It has all the tools and funds you might need.”

“Where’s the key?”

“You just have to enter a number. Today is Friday, so…enter all of the digits in the first 100 digits of pi that create a multiple of 7. Three errors and you’ll be permanently locked out.”

“What a pain in the ass!!”

“If it wasn’t a pain in the ass, it wouldn’t be a very good key. By the way, detective, you can use any of the tools I have prepared, but do you know where you will begin your investigation?”

“I was almost killed in the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. I’m going to start by investigating the guy who did it.”

“I see. I just received some new information too, so you can look into that while you’re at it.”

“What is it?”

“Tomoe has disappeared,” she said as if she was fed up with all of this.

And yet I was the one who most of everything was happening to.

“Tomoe’s mother just called me. It seems she is calling everyone she can for information. Her mother thinks Tomoe might have run away from home, but I bet she’s chasing after Tsumada Mio.”

“Before, she had at least been following her curfew. Why would she suddenly break that rule?”

“The odds are good she found some information on Tsumada Mio ahead of us. You might find something if you search Tsumada Mio and Tomoe’s rooms.”

I pictured Hachikawa Tomoe’s face in my mind and I remembered something else.

“Come to think of it, who was ‘that person’ Tomoe-chan kept mentioning?”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot to explain that.” The mystery freak hesitated for a moment. “Tomoe’s mother got remarried, so she is not blood related to her current father.”

“…”

So is this new father “that person”?

But my guess was wrong.

“Tomoe’s real father is a police detective. It seems he would get so lost in his work that he ignored looking after her or even speaking to her, so they did not even possess the bare minimum of familial bonds. Hence why he is just ‘that person’. But he was the first person she asked for help when Tsumada Mio disappeared, so I think she really did trust him deep down.”

That must have been why she hated the police.

He had not been able to find Tsumada Mio and therefore had not lived up to his daughter’s trust.

But now that I was isolated from the police and could use all the help I could get, it might be worth seeing if he might help me.

“By the way, what was this detective’s name?” I asked.

“…”

“Answer me, mystery freak. What was his name!?”

When I asked again, Enbi nervously spoke a name.

It was the last name I had expected.

“Toujou Miyabi. Do you know him?”

I’m pretty sure I stopped breathing for a few seconds.

“Ha…ha ha.”

“Detective…?” asked the mystery freak in puzzlement.

The Toujou Miyabi she had just mentioned was likely not the same person that had attacked me.

The man using Toujou's name had said the real Toujou Miyabi was buried in a mountain.

So that's it.

It all fits together so nicely, dammit!!

"Hey, mystery freak. You work to find Hachikawa Tomoe-chan. That's your top priority! Being even a second too slow could be the difference between life and death!!"

"What do you mean?"

"I know why she disappeared. She is likely with someone she believes is her father, but this Toujou is someone else! Given the situation, Tomoe-chan probably realized something due to being so close to Tsumada Mio. And she has given that hint to Toujou. Toujou thinks he can use her, so he is tricking her so she will lead him to the missing girl. And once that is over, he will have no more need for her!!"

"Understood. What will you do, detective? Since you are only interested in the living, I thought you would focus on Tomoe."

"That does suit me better, but I have something I have to do first."

I ended the call and sat down on the scooter's seat.

I started by travelling to the mystery freak's base.

My plan was to grab a complete set of the forensic kits she liked to use and then head to Toujou Miyabi's residence.

Part 19 (3rd person)

Hachikawa Tomoe was sitting in the passenger seat of a 4-door domestic luxury car.

Toujou Miyabi sat in the driver's seat.

He was someone claiming to be her father.

"I have learned that Tsumada Mio-chan has been spotted in the area you just told me about, Tomoe."

"…"

"She is most likely relying on her grandparents. A girl with no financial foundation will ultimately rely on her relatives rather than some stranger trying to pick her up on the street. Since she was not with her parents, her grandparents or other relatives seem likely," said Toujou as he merged onto a major road.

"Wouldn't her relatives have been the first place the police checked?"

"She is not a suspect of any crime. If her family covers for her, there is nothing we can do. We can only write up a report saying they said she was not there. And even if we had done a search of her grandparents' home, I doubt we would have found Tsumada Mio-chan there."

"What do you mean?"

"Her grandparents own quite a lot of land. They own several mountains. And according to a neighbor, they built small huts all over their land during the 0-yen lifestyle boom that was big on TV shows for a while. I cannot search private land without a warrant and I would have a hard time finding her hideout in all those mountains even if I did."

"And so you relied on me?"

"You said you had seen some photos, right?

"…Yes. Mio said she had gone on a bit of an adventure while over at her grandfather's house over summer break."

“Do you know where it is?”

“Generally. She drew out a map while bragging about it. But the map was not to scale or anything.”

“That is fine. As long as you can tell me which way to turn, that is enough.”

Hachikawa Tomoe secretly glanced over at the man holding the steering wheel.

He was focused on driving, so she could only see the side of his face.

“…You’re finally acting like a father.”

“I have not done anything yet. When we reach the mountain, I will make sure to find Tsumada Mio-chan.”

The man calling himself Toujou Miyabi secretly gave a slight smile.

Hachikawa Tomoe did not know the meaning of that smile.

However…

“Grr…”

She thought she heard what sounded like a large dog growling.

And it did not seem to be coming from outside.

It seemed to come from within the car.

It sounded as if something in the backseat directly behind her was growling so closely she should have been able to feel its breath on her.

Part 20

In one corner of Kudanshita's lines of tidy office buildings, a room in a short and worn-down multi-tenant building functioned as one of the mystery freak's bases.

I could almost see the mystery freak proudly puffing out her chest as she had bragged about how she could easily live there with the convenient store and laundromat on the first floor as well as the leisure spa only a 100 meter walk away.

However…

"It would be really depressing to live here…"

The area around all four walls was filled with piles of files on unresolved cases. That was all that was in the room. There was a table in the center of the room, but it did not even have a chair to go with it.

A balled up sleeping bag had been left below the table, so it looked like about the worst possible place to try to get some sleep.

The room had no refrigerator or sink, much less an actual kitchen, but for some reason it did have a storage area below the floor. I opened it up and found a few bags the size of toolboxes.

I pulled them out and looked through them. They were all divided into sets for different tasks. For example, one held a laptop and a few USB memory sticks, one contained several types of reagents, and one was filled with bankbooks and cards.

I grabbed the bag containing the set that looked useful for forensics. I returned the others to the storage space under the floor.

I left the building, tossed the bag into the luggage area below the scooter's seat, and headed for Toujou Miyabi's residence.

The mystery freak had apparently previously learned the dead Toujou Miyabi's address from Tomoe-chan.

The mystery freak had said the following over the phone:

"It's in Ichigaya. It's actually quite a nice house, but its size may have emphasized the loneliness after his family left."

If the current Toujou was using that same house, something might remain there. He would have at least eliminated any information the real Toujou Miyabi had found, but the current Toujou's scent might still remain there.

I drove the scooter to my destination.

The value of land anywhere within the Yamanote Line was incredibly high and high-rise buildings were used to make efficient use of the limited space…or so I thought. It turned out there were exceptions. It was no match for an old house in an Intellectual Village, but it must have taken a lot of effort to build a house of this size in the city.

"Detective, how are you going to get inside?" asked the mystery freak over the phone.

"I don't have many options."

"If you break a window, you'll probably set off an alarm."

"I'm not going to go that far."

For one, I doubted any obvious evidence would remain inside the building. Any traces of the Toujou Miyabi who was buried in the mountains would have been eliminated by the Toujou who had taken on his face.

"Do you think Toujou Miyabi was suddenly attacked one day?" I asked.

"It's hard to say."

"If he began to catch a glimpse of the person behind all this while he was investigating the whereabouts of Tsumada Mio, I do not think he would leave the data he had collected where it would be easily found. He would hide it in some difficult-to-find place. …But still somewhere nearby."

I stopped the scooter in front of the house and climbed over the wall and into the yard. At this point I was illegally trespassing, but I could not guarantee Hachikawa Tomoe-chan's survival if I did not find any hint to Toujou's whereabouts.

Now then.

If I was a police detective, where would I hide data other than in the archives room?

Depending on the scope of the enemy, there could be a risk of having your entire house burned down.

Which meant…

“He needed a way to ensure it could not be destroyed even if the house was burned to the ground.”

I opened the bag I had borrowed from the mystery freak and pulled out the forensics kit. It could gather data from fingerprints, hairs, and bloodstains.

Forcing my way into the locked house would be a last resort. First, I would slowly investigate around the outside of the house while focusing on the yard.

If my thinking was correct, he would not have used anything wooden that would burn away in a fire. Concrete seemed more likely.

“Bingo.”

As I used a special device to spray a chemical, one spot gave off a pale light.

This was at the manhole located directly beside the hot-water heater. A single portion of the ground there was hardened with concrete and I found a bloodstain on the underside of the small manhole lid.

Technically, this was the trace of something being written with blood and then washed away by water.

I was seeing a luminol reaction.

Most people have heard the term in dramas or movies. Bloodstains could not be completely erased just by washing them away. No matter how much it was washed, the stain would remain and it would stand out too much if the entire manhole cover was thrown away. A replacement lid could not be ordered from a hardware store and the manhole could not be left open. The stench would gather the attention of the entire neighborhood.

What it had written was…

“A 20-digit number and a string of 11 alphanumeric characters? Is this for an online data storage site?”

The 20-digit number would be the ID and the 11 characters would be the password. The ID number resembled the ones used by a major company.

The data storage itself could be accessed from a normal cell phone. I opened up the login page and entered the number and alphanumeric string from the luminol reaction.

It worked.

I found a large number of reports.

I could view them, but a different password was needed to delete or edit the data.

Most of it was text and low resolution photos. It seemed Toujou Miyabi would use any break in his work to input any information into his phone and add it to the storage.

“…”

As I skimmed through the text, I could see him start searching for Tsumada Mio and slowly discover the link to the SNS murders.

I also found a list of all reports of sightings of someone who may have been Tsumada Mio.

Seventy to eighty percent of that sort of information was always useless, but it seemed Toujou Miyabi had diligently pursued each and every one of them.

From what I could see, he had a very methodical personality.

After enough useless leads, people tended to grow more lax and write less detailed reports, but that was not the case here. Every single report was filled with detail.

Why had he been so dedicated to his job?

Working for the organization known as the police meant you had to face death. A normal person would be unable to withstand it. To face it calmly, they needed to construct a “mental detour”.

For a similar example, think of doctors.

They cut open several people with blades every day. They must have grown used to doing so. But if you gave a doctor a knife and ordered him to go kill someone, he would refuse. Some of them might even vomit if they were holding a blade for the purpose of killing someone.

That was their “mental detour”.

They were not hurting anyone; they were saving them. That was why they could do it.

That was how humans worked.

For me, it was helping the relatives of the victim and anyone else who was still alive. For the mystery freak, it was figuring out why the victim had died.

That was how people were able to face things that could not be looked at directly.

So what had it been for Toujou Miyabi?

The answer to that was hidden in this methodical text.

“…I see,” I muttered.

The data stopped being updated at the end of May.

That was when the SNS murders had been solved. That was when the person behind the project had moved on. That was when the Jinmensou project had begun and Toujou’s interest had turned toward Tsumada Mio and the person behind it all. That must have been when something had happened.

“All of this evidence was ignored and sealed away for various reasons. Was it your doctrine to gather up every last piece of it?”

If that was the case, these overly methodical reports made sense.

The thick report in the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department’s archives room was amazing, but this was something else entirely.

He had not simply investigated Tsumada Mio because his daughter had asked him to.

The detective named Toujou Miyabi had been the type to head to the depths of hell so that he could hear the cries of those too deep in the darkness to be reached just by stretching out an arm.

“And this is what became of him?”

Even as his family had left him because he failed to hear the voices of those closest to him, he had continued to pursue the case and had stepped on a landmine he should have avoided at all costs. And as a result, his daughter’s life was now in danger from someone with the exact same face and the exact same voice.

Could this really be allowed to happen?

Could the dead be dishonored any more than this?

“Dammit…”

I returned the manhole cover and left Toujou Miyabi’s house.

It was not like me to work for the sake of the dead like this.

“Dammit!!”

I boarded the scooter, put on the helmet, and called the mystery freak.

“I found some data from Toujou Miyabi’s personal storage. Tsumada Mio’s grandparents’ house is in Okutama. The police went to the grandparent’s house to question them, but Tsumada Mio was not there. However, those grandparents own a mountain. If they have a small cabin somewhere, it wouldn’t be difficult to hide a single child.”

It was not unlikely that grandparents would tell a lie or two to protect their granddaughter who had lost her place at school and home due to the Jinmensou. This was another “mental detour”. Even if they could not lie to deceive the police, they might be able to lie to protect their granddaughter.

“Where exactly is it?” asked the mystery freak.

“I don’t know. But Toujou made his move because he thinks he has a chance. And he brought Hachikawa Tomoe-chan with him. To be honest, I don't see why he would need Tomoe-chan here. Which means…"

"Tomoe knows the answer?"

"You've made your way into Hachikawa Tomoe-chan's house as her classmate, right? Make sure you find something. I'll be heading for Okutama."

"How are you going to catch up to them!? If he has Tomoe with him, they must be in a car. Plus, they have a large head start. No matter how fast you move, Toujou will get there first!!"

"True. But the police are searching for me, so they've set up checkpoints throughout the city. He'll get through just fine because they look like father and daughter, but he needs to stop and put on a smile at each checkpoint. That should slow him down a good bit."

"Tomoe disappeared an hour ago."

"If he is strictly following the legal speed limit and stopping at each checkpoint, I can catch up. I just need a way of heading straight to Okutama at almost 100 kph."

"The police are on high alert. If you drive that fast on a normal road, they'll catch you right away. And they will almost certainly have checkpoints set up on the highway."

"If I use normal roads, yes. And I can't use the highway with this scooter anyway."

"Then what are you going to do? The trains have already stopped."

"The freight trains haven't. They also don't stop at the intervening stations. They head straight to the last stop at Okutama."

I called up a map on the cell phone and displayed the points where overpasses crossed over the train tracks.

And I found the perfect spot.

It was right near a curve where the train would lower its speed.

"But…"

I've seen it in plenty of dramas and movies, but will I really be okay if I jump onto a freight train? It isn't going to rip off my arms and legs, is it?

Part 21 (3rd person)

“Over there. I think it’s to the left of that big tree,” said Hachikawa Tomoe while needlessly pointing.

The road was so narrow a single car covered it over entirely. The mountain road was pitch black due to the lack of streetlights and a passenger car drove along it at the legal speed limit.

While holding the steering wheel, Toujou said, “This area wasn’t designated an Intellectual Village, was it?”

“The village at the base of the mountain was, but Mio’s grandparents were opposed to the change. They could do nothing to change the view of the entire village, but they were able to keep their private property from being included.”

“Do her grandparents have a phobia of electromagnetic waves or something?”

“I don’t know. But even if they do-…Oh, it’s there. Once you make this turn, it should just be a direct path there.”

“I see,” muttered Toujou as he slowly stepped on the brake.

The car came to a stop on that empty mountain road.

“? Wait a second. What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“…”

“Did an animal dart across the road up ahead? Oh, or did you blow a tire?”

“Tomoe-chan,” muttered Toujou. He let out a heavy sigh and then smoothly reached for the side of his waist with his right hand. “You are an interesting girl in a lot of ways. For one, you came out to this remote area with no suspicion whatsoever.”

“Eh…?”

For an instant, Hachikawa Tomoe did not know what to think.

Her entire mind was focused directly forward.

She was trying to grasp what it was that was being held out toward her.

It was a shiny black hunk of metal.

It was a handgun.

“W-wait. What are you-…?”

“Get out,” said Toujou, cutting her off. “Get out. If you do not, I will drag you out.”

Overpowered by that gun barrel, Hachikawa Tomoe slowly opened the passenger-side door and stepped out of the car. She thought she was being abandoned in that dark mountain, but she was wrong. Toujou then stepped out from the driver’s seat. He pointed the large handgun at her once more.

“…What are you doing?”

“I no longer need you, Tomoe-chan,” said Toujou with a thin smile. “By the way, this is not my first time to kill. I’m quite used to it, so please don’t pointlessly try to persuade me, resist, or beg for your life. I do not have time to deal with such annoyances.”

“…!!”

Hachikawa Tomoe had no idea what Toujou was saying, so she simply tried to run away.

But she never even managed to turn around.

She froze in place before she could move.

“Grr,” came a bestial growl.

Something was only 30 cm behind her. As soon as she heard it, sweat poured from Hachikawa Tomoe’s entire body. Something huge and overwhelming was there. This was not just a large dog. This was something that could easily break through a cage at a zoo.

“Do not turn around,” said Toujou as he grinned and continued to aim the gun at her. “It will probably be easiest for you if you die without learning anything.”

“Why…?”

“Do not worry. I do not need to make this look like suicide. If a body is found here with a bullet through the head, the police will probably assume you just happened to come across someone who was here to bury another corpse. The same thing happens all across Japan. No one will think I did it.”

Something was directly behind Hachikawa Tomoe.

But an obvious gun barrel was directly in front of her.

There was nowhere to run.

No one would come to save her.

“This is not a .38 issued by the police. This is a .45 I acquired for myself. Even the bullets are quite cool. The bullet will blow apart half of your soft brain as soon as it hits, so you will feel no pain. So there is nothing to fear. …At the very least, it is a better fate than being *attacked by a canine beast* while walking along a mountain path.”

“…Ah…”

“Farewell, Tomoe-chan. *You will probably go to heaven, so send my regards to your real father.*”

And that was all.

He did not hesitate.

He pulled the trigger.

A dry gunshot rang out.

Flesh exploded out and the air filled with the stench of blood.

Hachikawa Tomoe limply fell to the ground.

Her wide-open eyes reflected the scene before her.

“…Gh…”

Someone groaned.

It was a male voice.

It was the voice of the man named Toujou.

"Ghh!! My…arm…! My…my arrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrmmmmmmmmmmm!!"

He was trying to use his left hand to hold the wound on his right arm, but that left hand was already dyed red.

This was not surprising.

Toujou's right arm had been blown off at the wrist. The giant black handgun was gone. It had exploded from the inside and several shards had fallen to the cracked asphalt.

It was obvious what had happened.

The gun had malfunctioned.

But there had been no reason for that malfunction.

Normally, at least.

"…Ahh! Th-that bastard… It had to be him. *He touched my gun in the archives room.* He tampered with it!!"

The bestial growl from behind Hachikawa Tomoe grew. It seemed to be reacting to Toujou's mental turmoil.

"U-Uchi-Uchima-Uchimaku!!! How dare you…how dare you take my haaaaaaaaaaaaaannnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnddddddddddddddddddddddddd

Hachikawa Tomoe thought he was going to give into his anger and have whatever was behind her attack. She thought she was going to be torn apart and eaten as if by a lion or tiger.

But that did not happen.

As if in response to Toujou's shout, two gunshots rang out somewhere else on the mountain. Sweat was pouring from Toujou's face due to the intense pain, but the gunshots seemed to bring him back to his senses.

He looked at Hachikawa Tomoe and hesitated over something, but ultimately gave precedence to running away. While holding his mangled wrist, Toujou ran off into the deep darkness of the mountain.

Hachikawa Tomoe remained motionless for a while.

She could not grasp what was going on.

Part 22

When I fired those gunshots in the dark mountains of Okutama, I did not actually know exactly where Toujou and Hachikawa Tomoe-chan were. I had only entered the mountain the mystery freak had learned Tsumada Mio's grandparents owned.

However, if my sabotage had been effective, there was a chance Tomoe-chan was still alive.

And if I let him hear those gunshots, it would tell Toujou I had come this far. He would assume I knew where he was that I was staring at him through my gun's sight in order to keep him from killing Hachikawa Tomoe.

I had actually only fired randomly up into the night sky.

As I ran along the mountain road toward the sound of the initial gunshot, I finally spotted an abandoned car. The road had a small bloodstain on it, grotesque pieces of flesh and fingers were scattered about, and Hachikawa Tomoe-chan was sitting on the ground.

"Hachikawa-san!!" I ran over and grabbed her shoulders. "Are you hurt? It looks like the gun malfunctioned, but did any of the fragments hit you!?"

"…"

She seemed to be conscious, but she was slow to react. She may have experienced a great mental shock. She slowly moved just her eyes to look at me.

"He…tried to kill me…"

"Hachikawa-san?"

"He…he tried to…but he's my father…he had a gun…and that growling…m-my father…tried to k-kill me…!!"

Hachikawa Tomoe-chan still thought that Toujou was her father.

It was only natural to be shocked when her "father" tried to kill her.

But…

"Hachikawa-san, this is going to be tough to hear, but please listen."

"There's more? What more could there be? I've had enough! I can't deal with anything more!!"

"The real Toujou Miyabi-san was likely killed around the end of May. This man is someone else entirely."

"…Eh?"

"Your father was not the kind of person who would kill his own daughter! He worked until the very, very end to fight against this kind of villain! That's why I was able to make it here. The data your real father gathered led me here!! You do not need to think he betrayed you. Your father lived a life you can be proud of."

Which truth was better?

Both being killed by one's father and learning your father died months ago were too much to accept.

But once a case began, I focused on the living more than the dead.

I could not lie to a living civilian for the sake of a dead detective.

"…Who is he?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "But whoever he is, I will arrest him. I will not let him hurt you, Tsumada Mio-san, or anyone else."

Should I leave her here or take her with me?

I was unsure what to do, but this Toujou had clearly tried to kill her. It would be too dangerous to take her to the scene of a firefight.

"You follow this road down the mountain. The mystery frea-… Hishigami Enbi-san is heading here. You should cross paths."

"Be careful," said Tomoe-chan with a pale face. "His gun was not his only weapon. *He controlled some sort of large beast.* It seemed to go nuts when he started bleeding."

I was not sure what she meant, but I nodded.

I wondered what she was thinking as she sat on the ground there. Her expression was twisted into something that none of the standard emotions adequately described.

"…Please save Mio."

"That's my job," I said before running down the mountain road.

Toujou must have been bleeding quite a bit because drips of blood could be seen along the cracked asphalt. I could not trust that trail of blood too much because it could be a trap, but it would still function as a decent guide.

As I thought, I pulled out my cell phone.

Is this Toujou still using Toujou Miyabi's number?

"Hey, Uchimaku…"

"It seems you made a huge mistake. You should hurry up and surrender. You won't last 30 minutes with that much bleeding."

"Don't underestimate me. I already *had the wound bitten closed.* Do you really think you've won? I had to go to some extra effort in the archives room to make it look like a suicide, but if all I have to do is kill you…"

The conversation continued as I jogged along the mountain road.

I was not trying to trace his location.

I was fairly certain Toujou had lost a hand. Holding the cell phone would take up his other hand. I could tell whether he was using speaker phone from how much background noise was being picked up. In other words, as long as he was speaking on the phone, Toujou could not use his weapon. I was ensuring my safety.

"Uchimaku, how much do you know?"

"Enough to know that arresting you will bring this to an end."

"Ha ha. Well, you're right about that." Toujou seemed to be laughing somewhere on the mountain. "Those idiots making that pathetic Package were causing too many problems, so I slaughtered them. That faux-intellectual insider group had gotten a bit carried away, so they had almost no military might. Houjou and Saijou tried to stop me, but Tsumada Mio is simply that valuable. If they had simply agreed to hand her over, none of this would have happened.”

“What do you hope to do with Tsumada Mio?”

“You will find out when you get here and see this. Personally, I can barely wait. This is greater than I expected. I bought bone marrow from an Inugami bloodline and changed my blood type with a transplant in order to *fuse with the Inugami,* but this is on an entirely different level. This goes even beyond the ultimate objective of our organization.”

“Ultimate objective? Organization?”

“Damn, this hurts… That’s right. *Our* objective is to remake the human body into that of a Youkai. I thought Houjou had beaten me to it, but it looks like I’ll be first.”

I heard an unpleasant sound over the phone.

Is he just coughing or is he actually coughing up blood? I wouldn’t think that would have caused any internal bleeding…

“Hey, Uchimaku. Think back to the Jinmensou incident. That group was attaching Jinmensou to girls passing through Shibuya, but how do you think they attached the Jinmensou to their target?”

I had not actually cleared up that aspect of the case. For one thing, a Jinmensou was a Youkai. Unless they had a good reason, they would not appear in the city.

“Jinmensou appear as a symbol of the lies someone has said or the sins they have committed. But those lies have a certain requirement. You could call this the starting point.”

“Are you saying Tsumada Mio was involved in something?” I asked.

“Yes, exactly. You did some research on Tsumada Mio, right? What sort of impression did you get of her?”

“She seemed like a sociable girl with a lot of friends before the Jinmensou appeared. Her social circle had spread even beyond her class.”

“Do you know that for sure?” cut in Toujou with a sneering voice.

Shit, his injuries should be slowing him down. Have I still not caught up *to him?*

“You only know that because of the notepad in her room. The one with all the photo stickers on it. But doesn’t it seem odd for it to still be there?”

“You don’t mean…”

“She took her schoolbag and tablet computer with her when she disappeared, so why did she leave behind that notepad with all its photo stickers? That should have been the symbol of her status. Why was it still there?”

“It was faked…?’

I felt like the ground was lurching beneath my feet.

But when I thought about it, it was not all that difficult a thing to do. Photo stickers could be found plastered all over the city. Even an amateur could retrieve some and reattach them somewhere else.

But why would she do it?

Perhaps she had not wanted to worry her family or her neighbor from another school, Hachikawa Tomoe-chan.

In that case…

“Some Jinmensou are said to spew toxins from their mouths. Those covered in the toxin will gain a face as ugly as the Jinmensou,” said Toujou. “A certain rumor has spread through Shibuya. It says Tsumada Mio, a poor girl with no friends, has been gathering photo stickers. In order to save this isolated girl, *people are to claim to be Tsumada Mio’s friend if asked.* Well, it seems even the real Toujou was fooled by this and assumed she was popular. …That is a lie and a sin. Whenever she was lied about, Tsumada Mio’s Jinmensou spewed toxins that afflicted the bodies of the liars and caused the ugly faces to multiply.”

“How could this happen…?”

The original masterminds behind the Jinmensou had wanted to use them to threaten the children of corporate executives and shareholders, so they had likely approached the children who met the Jinmensou’s requirements and asked them that question. They may have pretended to be a teacher or from a private investigation company.

Their responses may indeed have been lies.

But were those lies really worth calling sins?

“Then why did the original Jinmensou appear on Tsumada Mio?” I asked. “She may have lied about having a lot of friends, but she was still in the city. I doubt a rural-loving Youkai would attach to her there.”

“I don’t know, but something about the Jinmensou’s nature was likely twisted in the Package. For example, what if a Jinmensou they acquired somewhere was attached to Tsumada Mio’s umbilical cord where it was stored in a corner of her grandparents’ rural house? Even if she was in a distant place, that would still qualify as the Jinmensou afflicting her body.”

And then that single Jinmensou patient had led to an explosive outbreak centered on Shibuya.

If that was the case…

“So you’re after the special case at the source of the infection?”

“I’m glad you finally understand. The fusion of a human and a Jinmensou might lead to something *not human* if taken to the next level. And it does not require fine-tuning for each individual human. As long as Tsumada Mio exists as the core, it will spread without end. This will greatly shorten the work and examination needed in the past methods such as transplanting bone marrow from an Inugami bloodline.”

“Do you really think I’ll let you do this?”

“And I will not let you stop me. *Don’t think you will get off as easily as just losing a hand.*”

The call suddenly ended.

At the same time, I spotted a wooden cabin through the gaps in the cedar trees. It was a small cabin, but it still looked larger than my apartment. It had a small water wheel that may have been used to generate power.

In the end, I had been unable to catch up to him partway there.

But Toujou’s goal was to capture Tsumada Mio, not kill her. I doubted he would harm her right away.

I pulled out my .38 caliber revolver and slowly approached the cabin.

The cabin’s lights did not appear to be on.

The trail of blood headed straight to the front door, so Toujou was likely already inside.

I pressed up against the wall next to the door and touched the doorknob.

And I turned it.

After making sure it was not locked, I kicked open the door.

The attack came immediately afterwards.

I suffered a fatal wound and was knocked to the floor.

Part 23

It seemed it had only been intended as a playful attack.

Nevertheless, I was knocked across the cabin as if I had been struck by a large truck. I could not breathe. I coughed up a great bit of blood. I tried to bring my hands to my mouth, but they only twitched slightly and would not move.

“Cough!? Cough cough!!”

“Didn’t I tell you, Uchimaku?” Toujou’s voice filled the darkness of the cabin. “Simply killing you is no problem for me. They are known as Inugami[2], but they are actually more like a formless curse. It does not matter if you dodge to the right or to the left, or if you charge forward all at once or cautiously approach. *If I tell it to do it, it will do it.* That is all there is to it.”

“Grr,” came the growling of a large beast.

What is going on?

Is there a lion or a tiger hiding in this darkness? Or is Toujou making that growling noise?

I had no way to know which it was.

Wait a second.

Toujou and this beast are here, but where is Tsumada Mio?

I could not sense her presence.

Was that third party really in the small cabin?

“No, I did not expect this either,” said Toujou.

I could hear someone feeling along the wall. However, I did not know where my handgun had gone after I dropped it. And even if I did know, I still could not move my body after that impact.

Finally, I heard a clicking noise.

It was the sound of a plastic switch being flipped.

At the same time, bright light filled the world and blinded me. It took me several seconds to realize this was nothing more than a fluorescent light.

Now that the cabin was illuminated, I could see it truly had nothing but a blanket. Not only did it have no items of entertainment such as books or a game system, but it had no refrigerator, washing machine, or anything else needed to live one's life. That made sense for an emergency cabin in the mountains, but I could not see how a teenage girl could have lived here for months.

And in the center of the cabin was some dense mass.

"…Pant… You're…kidding me…"

"It's pretty horrible," muttered Toujou with a thin smile on his face as he stood against the wall sweating and holding his injured arm. "I've heard of a man who survived for a month after his car was buried in snow. It seems the low temperature brought on a state similar to hibernation. …But this goes beyond that. How do you think it's possible for a human to survive for four months without eating or drinking anything?"

This mass was sitting in the seiza position.

This mass was wearing a long-sleeved sailor uniform.

I had once heard about the process of Sokushinbutsu from my old man back home. That was not actually a ghost story, but it had still scared me more than any other story I had ever heard.

A sealed room would be dug into the ground and a Buddhist monk would enter it. All the exits would be completely sealed, he would be given no food or oxygen, and he would simply continue praying until he was mummified. This was different from being forcibly buried alive or killed. They dried themselves up of their own free will. They cut off all the animalistic instincts that were natural for humans and took a certain path to its extreme.

This…

This was a lot like that.

But this was not an overly light corpse that looked like dried up twigs. All of the skin had become a bluish black, but the body still contained moisture and its surface was writhing slightly.

"She's…alive…?"

"Seems that way. I've never heard of a Jinmensou attaching itself to a corpse. And that means Tsumada Mio is still alive even in this state. Her body has been remade so that she can remain alive." True admiration could be heard in Toujou's voice. "However, it does not seem that movement is based on her own will. That is just the Jinmensou covering every inch of her body moving around as they please."

Those words sent a definite chill down my spine.

It can't be….

It can't be!!

"Are you saying all of that bluish-black stuff is made up of Jinmensou!?"

You're kidding.

That can't be true.

That's too horrible to be true!!

Those girls had felt they would never be accepted with even one of those tumors that were a few centimeters across. And now Tsumada Mio was completely covered in them. To cover her entire body, it had to be more than just a dozen or two.

In my confusion, I pointlessly searched for some way of denying the truth before my eyes.

"But a Jinmensou is a tumor that looks like a large bug bite. They don't turn that color!!"

"I don't know why they're like this. Maybe they were always like this and maybe this is a result of the Package. If my umbilical cord theory is correct, they might have made their way in through her stomach. At any rate, it seems the tumors may have *moved inside her* instead of staying on the surface. Once they filled her up, they caused a great change to the flow of her blood. This discoloration may be similar to a type of internal bleeding."

But why were there so many Jinmensou?

The girl from the convenience store robbery had only had one.

“I had thought Tsumada Mio’s Jinmensou would simply spew toxins to assault the girls in Shibuya, but it seems each time those girls lied, a new Jinmensou would also be appear on Tsumada Mio as a sort of feedback. It’s like she’s bearing the burden of all the lies of the city. I wonder how many Jinmensou she even has attached. I doubt 100 or even 1000 would be enough to account for this. Ha ha!!”

“…”

I glared at Toujou from where I lay collapsed on the ground.

“What are you going to do with her?” I asked.

“Take her home with me, of course. Like I said, I’ll be the first. No one else in the organization has a specimen that has *left humanity behind* as much as this. I thought I could never catch up to Houjou, but with her, I might be able to surpass him. Not to mention Saijou and Nanjou.”[3]

My handgun was lying quite nearby.

If I could only muster up some strength, I could grab it right away.

“Stop that.” Toujou shook his head. “Surely you know a bullet will do nothing here. I was testing you before. I only had the Inugami lightly charge at you. If I snap my fingers and order it to bite you, you’re done for. Your upper body will have to say goodbye to your lower body.”

“Are you…someone like Hishigami Mai?”

“Hishigami?” Toujou frowned slightly before continuing. “Oh, yes. I had her right arm bitten off during a personal job a long time ago. I remember because her body had an interesting composition. But she altered her body while remaining human. That is too far removed from our principles.”

That went well beyond my expectations.

Both the fact that he had torn off that monster woman’s arm and that she had recovered from it with no scar were well outside my ideas of how the world worked.

“Now then, can we get this over with already? I will be taking Tsumada Mio with me. You will remain here. Okay?”

"…Don't you need to kill me?"

"I intended to, but that would be too boring. Since you gained your freedom after the situation I left you in, I can only assume you escaped the interrogation room. I wonder what the police will decide happened when they find you at the site of Tsumada Mio's disappearance? That sounds a lot funnier than just killing you."

"Your blood is all over this place."

"That doesn't matter. It isn't enough to identify me. I have no more use for the Toujou Miyabi identity. I just need to alter the electronic medical records on the cloud to make sure these bloodstains can't be traced back to me. *I will return to the world I came from. The likes of you can never reach that world.*"

As he spoke, Toujou approached the bluish black Tsumada Mio sitting seiza-style in the center of the cabin. I tried to move my fingers.

Okay…I can just barely move them. I should be able to stand!!

That was when I heard the same bestial growling as before.

I was only a few meters from my handgun. However, that growl was an obvious threat keeping me from advancing those few meters.

Toujou picked up the unmoving Tsumada Mio and carried her over his shoulder.

My mind was filled with nothing but the distance between my fingertips and the handgun, but I could not avoid having a few words leak from my mouth.

"Wait, Toujou…"

"Stop it. The time to beg for your life has long since passed. I've already lost a hand, remember?"

"Leave Tsumada Mio here. She isn't something you can just use like this!"

"Ha ha hahh." It seemed Toujou could not help but laugh. "C'mon, Uchimaku. I had no real reason to explain everything to you like I did. I could have put on some act. And yet here I am speaking with you. Why do you think that is? I understand all too well how valuable information is, so why would I do that?”

“…What…?”

“*Tsumada Mio has become a symbol of judging people for their lies, so it is best not to lie in front of her,* Uchimaku. I don’t know if you thought it was the etiquette of adulthood or something, but it may have been a mistake to say something so idealistic in front of her. …A fatal mistake.”

Almost at the exact moment Toujou finished speaking, pain exploded in my right thigh and left wrist.

I felt the same sort of heat combined with itching and pain as with a bug bite except much, much worse.

I knew perfectly well what was happening to me.

Before long, the itching passed along the major nerves of my body and took control of all my body’s senses.

“Gaahhh!? This is…a Jinmensou…!?”

“Just to be clear, this wasn’t me. Uchimaku, you did this to yourself. It’s quite ironic really. You are punished for your idealistic statements made for the sake of justice and I survive unscathed for honestly saying such horrible things.”

The itching was so bad I grew confused as to the size of my own body, but a question still remained in my head.

What did the Jinmensou react to just now?

I had come this far to save Tsumada Mio. My intentions there had not changed. So why had the Jinmensou reacted to a lie?

Had I lied without even realizing it?

Or did something qualify as a lie as long as Tsumada Mio thought it was one?

For one thing, it was still unclear what basis Tsumada Mio used to determine if something was a lie.

If it was simply anyone with any connection to her making any lie, everyone who had been around her would have been affected by a

Jinmensou.

But that had not happened.

For example, her parents and her neighbor, Hachikawa Tomoe-chan.

None of them had shown any sign of being affected by a Jinmensou.

“It…can’t be…”

“What is it, Uchimaku? You have the look of someone who has finally solved a puzzle, but this is already over.”

Tsumada Mio was so utterly covered in Jinmensou that not even the color of her skin was visible.

The Jinmensou would spread without limit when a lie was spoken.

Could it have been that I…no, that we were mistaken about something? It was a crazy idea, but we had never actually checked or proven that it was not the case.

Yes.

Were the Tsumada Mio her parents and Hachikawa Tomoe-chan had told us about and the Tsumada Mio the Shibuya girls, Toujou, and I were talking about *really the same person*?

“…Are you really Tsumada Mio?” I muttered without thinking.

Toujou looked puzzled and then the girl – or rather, the object in the shape of a girl – burst into tiny pieces. What looked like pieces of flesh scattered across the four walls and floor of the cabin, but that was not what they were.

They were all shaped like human faces.

Hundreds or even thousands of them had condensed into the shape of a girl.

These were Jinmensou.

They were the core of the lie.

This was the punishment for all of those who had spoken as if they knew who Tsumada Mio was despite not knowing anything about her.

As soon as the girl-shaped object blew to pieces, the itching and pain eating into my body disappeared. The Jinmensou for telling lies were gone. Completely gone.

“Inugami!!”

I immediately jumped for my handgun, but Toujou managed to shout calmly despite having lost his greatest prize. My fingertips reached the .38 caliber revolver, but I did not have time to grab it and aim.

My upper body was assaulted by an impact so strong it felt like an invisible dump truck had hit me. My body slammed against the wall.

“Gh…gh!!”

I slid down to the ground and found Toujou was holding my gun. The Inugami must have retrieved it for him.

“What happened? Hey, Uchimaku. Where did Tsumada Mio go? Where did you hide her!?”

“Heh…”

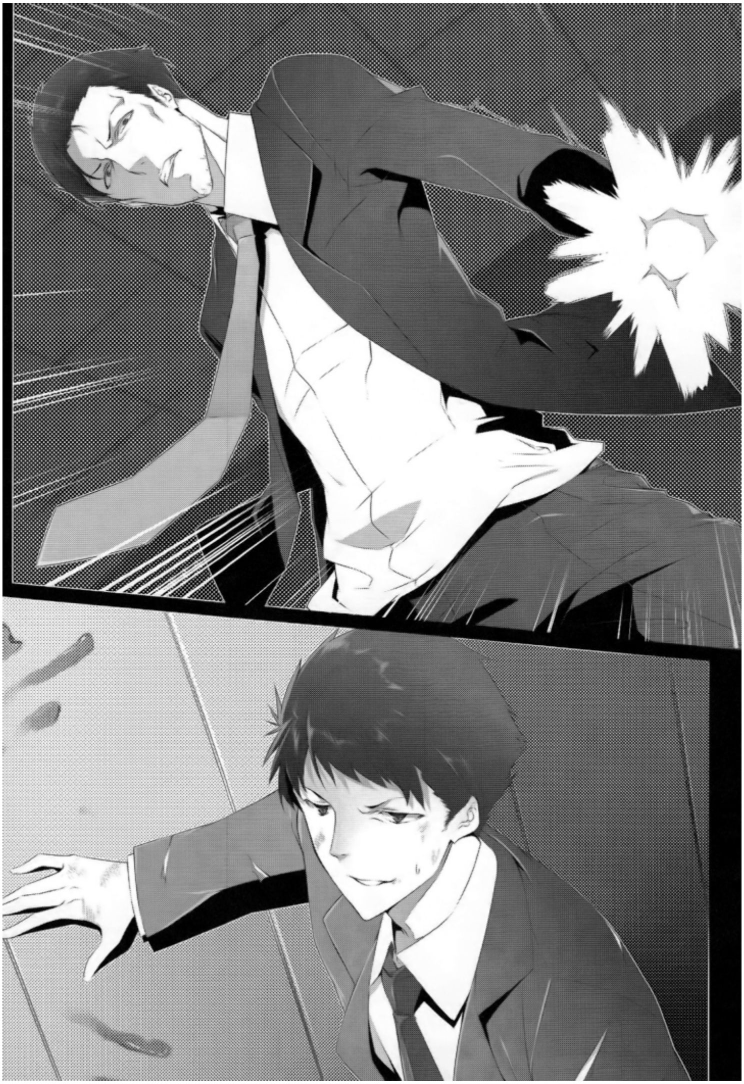
Can you not see her?

It may have been because I had finally grasped the truth and it may have been because I had finally tried to face the real Tsumada Mio.

Either way, I could now clearly see *another girl standing right next to me.*

“Out with it, Uchimaku. Where did Tsumada Mio go? If you don’t tell me, I’ll shoot you in each limb one at a time.”

“Hey,” I cut in with a smile. “Why are you relying on that gun when you have that Inugami as a secret weapon? Is it because that’s a Youkai you’re controlling? Yeah, I can see how that would be scary. It’s a monster with a will of its own. Even if you think you have complete control, you never know when it might bare its fangs toward you.”



“…What are you trying to say?”

“This is a bad habit of yours. *Have you already forgotten how you lost your other hand?*”

With a look of realization, Toujou frantically tried to throw the handgun away, but it was too late.

The sound of a metal balloon bursting exploded out.

And Toujou’s remaining hand was blown to pieces.

“G-gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh

A scream surged out.

I dug my fingers into the wall to slowly stand up.

“This is the second time, Toujou. It’s not even funny when you’re this stupid.”

The method of causing the revolver to malfunction like that was not easy, though. And the fact that the Inugami did not immediately attack me afterwards meant I was right about Toujou losing his ability to control the Youkai.

An Inugami resided in the blood.

I had always thought that was a way of expressing the more abstract concept of it sticking with a single family or bloodline, but Toujou had mentioned a bone marrow transplant. That meant the blood literally was the controller for the Inugami.

Maybe it was having a steady pulse, maybe it was blood pressure, and maybe it was simply the amount of blood. Whatever it was, Toujou was losing the ideal environment for controlling the Youkai that resided in his blood. Tomoe-chan had also said the Inugami had gone nuts when he started losing blood. What had sounded like him coughing up blood while we spoke over the phone may have been something similar. The Inugami was akin to a type of curse and it wielded *a strange Youkai like power* that would hit regardless of where you tried to evade. However, none of that mattered if he could not control it.

“What’s wrong, Toujou? *Can you no longer use your Inugami?*”

“!!”

“If you can’t, what do you think is going to happen to you?”

I had been struck by the Inugami and felt like my body had been horribly crushed, but I was still in a better state than Toujou. He had lost both hands in gun malfunctions and had lost quite a bit of blood. And if he could not control the Inugami, there was a danger of its fangs tearing into his own body.

“You…?” muttered Toujou blankly. “Someone with a supporting role like you…defeated me…?”

“That’s right. You’re just another criminal.”

Without his gun or Youkai, he was just a normal human.

And that meant he could be fairly judged in the courtroom and thrown in jail.

“You are charged with trespassing, attempted murder, and abduction of a minor.”

Toujou and I clashed head on at close range.

But all I had to do was my normal job.

When Toujou tried to smash the side of my head with his leather shoe that clearly had a weapon hidden in it, I swept his other leg out from under him, grabbed his necktie, and slammed his back to the floor. While he was unable to breathe, I held his arms in place, but I suddenly froze when I started to pull out my handcuffs.

“…With both your hands gone, I suppose handcuffs won’t do any good.”

I had no choice but to handcuff his ankles together instead. At any rate, he could not use his arms, so there was little need to seal his movements.

“Toujou, I have no idea who you really are, but you’re under arrest.”

Sorry.

But this is the kind of person Toujou Miyabi remained to the very end. This is the kind of person Hachikawa Tomoe-chan entrusted the safety of her friend to despite her complaints. This is what it is to be a police officer.

Part 24 (3rd person)

After receiving word that the man going by the name Toujou had been arrested, the department chief of Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department's Department 1, Mezu Gen, gave some instructions over the phone. He requested the formal wanted status on Uchimaku Hayabusa be rescinded.

Chief Superintendent Mishima's standard policy was "all's well that ends well", so he did not interfere. However, Mezu Gen still felt a chill run down his spine when he thought about what would have happened if Uchimaku had not succeeded.

Uchimaku had needlessly caught the attention of someone dangerous.

For once, Mezu Gen actually felt pity for one of his subordinates.

And he was still unable to determine why a monster of that level was giving so much focus to a single detective in a dead end job.

It disturbed him a bit, but it was obvious no answer was forthcoming. He set that problem aside and focused on the job before him.

Whoever it was that had been arrested had been transported to a large police station in Hachiouji, but if it was true that the real Toujou Miyabi had been killed, this would be a job for the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department or even the Public Security Bureau. It would be necessary to prepare a prisoner transport vehicle to bring him here as soon as possible.

Suddenly, the department chief's cell phone rang.

The number displayed on the screen was that of a familiar subordinate.

However, he heard a completely different voice when he answered.

It was a girl of about ten.

"The real danger is yet to come," she said.

"…Who is this?"

"I am not protesting your actions. You did the right thing. But that has brought about a problem that we cannot have brought to light. *Our world* will not allow it. So be on your guard. Be very, very careful that your prisoner transport vehicle does not under any circumstances meet an unforeseen accident before arriving."

"I see. So you are from *that side of things*."

The girl replied with the soft tone of someone explaining the difference between the geocentric model and the heliocentric model to someone who did not understand the structure of the world.

"We exist right alongside you. There is nothing dividing us and there are no restrictions keeping anyone from moving from one side to the other. That is why I am telling you to be careful. *Our world* is always watching yours. And we are close enough to easily – so very easily – reach out and touch it."

"So you're telling me not to get involved?" The department chief gave a derisive snort. "If your side had done your job properly, this never would have happened. Is that what you want me to say?"

"Are you not going to say it?"

"I don't see it that way. The Japanese police system is not perfect. That is what creates the openings for the likes of you to play at being allies of justice. That's all this is. This is nothing we should be upset about or anything you should be proud of. It never was and it never will be. Do you understand what I mean, young lady?"

"I see." Her voice seemed unable to hold something back. "If you have that much determination, we need not worry about *leaving this country to you.*"

"So to the very end, you're going to play the part of someone on the side of justice, is that it? And you're going to look down on me as you do it?"

"Well, I hope you will stick with this game of make believe a little longer, then."

"What are you trying to say?"

"All the Jinmensou that spread from Tsumada Mio disappeared as soon as the concentrated mass of lies was destroyed by the truth of Detective Uchimaku Hayabusa discovering the real Tsumada Mio.

However, one thing remains: the Inugami contained within the body of the man going by the name of Toujou Miyabi. No matter how you restrain him, he will undoubtedly break out of jail as soon as he inevitably regains control of that Youkai."

"…Are you saying you can do something about that?"

"If possible, we would like to retrieve him, but I doubt you would agree to that. As *your reward* for resolving this case on your own, I have contacted you instead of our usual contact so that I can tell you the means of neutralizing that Inugami."

"…"

"Control of his Inugami comes from the special bone marrow inserted into his spine. If you burn away that bone marrow with x-rays and transplant some new bone marrow in its place, the Inugami will leave him."

"Do you know Japanese law? We cannot commit any acts of violence on a restrained suspect. Cutting open his body and exchanging bone marrow is out of the question."

"But if the suspect's life is at risk, you have the right to perform an emergency operation at a police hospital without the suspect's consent. …And the suspect is in a fair bit of danger with his hands missing. What if a detailed examination found another illness needing treatment? *Couldn't that provide enough reason for the operation?*"

"…Are you asking us to clean up your mess?"

"I will leave the ultimate decision to you. However, only we have the fluorescent substance that will display only the Inugami bone marrow. If you do not ask for our help, this person going by the name Toujou Miyabi will eventually escape. We will take care of it if that happens, but I can make no promises as to the number of people who will lose their lives before we get there."

"Understood."

The department chief let out a sigh.

The dignity of the police was important, but he preferred to prioritize the safety of all involved.

And so he gave his answer.

“Send the fluorescent substance here. We will finish this.”

Notes

1. ↑ A Seman or Seman Doman is a type of Japanese magical charm with roots in Onmyoudou.
2. ↑ Inugami literally means Dog God.
3. ↑ It's worth mentioning that the four names Toujou, Houjou, Saijou, and Nanjou are each made with the kanji for one of the four cardinal directions (Tou = East, Hou = North, Sai = West, and Nan = South) and a kanji pronounced "jou".

Chapter 4: ??? @ The One Who Covers Up a God

Part 1 (Jinnai Shinobu)

I need to head toward cover. I need to head toward somewhere with plenty of places to hide behind and protect myself.

Fleeing toward the mountain with that in mind may have been a mistake. I was being led toward an area with no people where illegal violence could be employed without issue.

What is going on?

How could this happen?

I was in the Intellectual Village known as Noukotsu Village. Packages involving Youkai would occasionally happen here, but it was still an easier place to live than the city. That remained true even if the rural scenery was faked by various types of technology.

And yet…

“Shinobu!!”

I heard my uncle’s shout make its way through the gaps of the forest’s trees.

But I did not respond. I couldn’t!

Several people were tied up in *this messed up situation*, but each person’s survival was based on the same condition: *To survive, you must kill one of the other participants.* It was a simple, clear, and unavoidable rule. Both my uncle and myself had been closed in by that framework.

In other words…

My uncle and I were destined to try to kill each other.

And when it came down to pure violence, a normal high school student like me did not stand a chance against a professional police detective like my uncle. He likely outdid me in pure unarmed combat, but he might also have a handgun.

I could not trust anyone.

Given the situation, we could no longer work together.

However…

I still did not want to kill my uncle and the others. My mind stubbornly worked to find a way to get around the rules, find a loophole, or otherwise reach a conclusion where no one had to die.

But then…

The true disaster that arrived was enough to make me forget all about the rest of the horrible situation.

"*Shinobu!! Don't go that way! She's coming!!*"

I had forgotten to wonder why my uncle would be calling for me in this situation of mutual suspicion. When I thought about it, letting the others know his position in this thick forest would only put him at a disadvantage.

And then something happened.

A sound exploded out from my body as if something solid had been knocked out of place.

I had been struck from behind. I tried to turn around, but my head would not turn like I told it to. I twisted my waist around while lying collapsed on the grassy-smelling dirt and managed to roll onto my back. Only then did I catch a glimpse of who had attacked me.

It was a woman with the sort of Japanese paper used for calligraphy forcibly pasted all over her body. She was like a monster created by spell words congealed into a human form. Something had been skillfully written on the Japanese paper with black ink, but the papers were so crumpled up to perfectly match the lines of the woman's body that the words were distorted.

I could not read what was written on them.

I somehow managed to squeeze out a voice while barely breathing at all.

"…Hishigami…Mai…?"

If that monster was taking part in this killing game where blood was washed away with blood, then it was much too obvious who would win in the end.

This paper-covered Hishigami Mai crouched down as if to peer at my face. Her hands reached out for my neck. I tried to twist my body around to escape, but I could no longer move properly.

She mercilessly brought her hands in as if to strangle a chicken.

And then my heart literally stopped beating.

Part 2 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

After finally getting a day off, I visited an indoor fishing pond that had opened in Ikebukuro. Even when I had lived in Noukotsu Village, I had preferred playing by the river instead of the mountain.

The fishing pond's greatest feature was its large tank for migratory fish that functioned like a lazy river at a water park. The pond's tagline was "the leisure spot where you can catch a bluefin tuna". The tank ran through a donut-shaped circuit in a building the size of fair-sized aquarium and the customers paid to fish in it.

The reception area was one floor below and the inside of the tank could be seen through tempered glass. The tuna I could see swimming through it were only about 70 cm, but they still technically qualified as a small type of bluefin tuna.

According to the smiling receptionist girl, "If they were any larger than this, normal fishers would have difficulty catching them. Even if you are wearing gloves, there would be a danger of losing a finger to the line."

Any tuna you caught would be prepared for you in the facility's restaurant and (if you were willing to pay) you could still eat tuna if you did not catch one, so I had not eaten anything despite this being my day off. As I drank some vegetable juice to tide over my empty stomach, I rented a fairly thick fishing pole and some spear squid for bait and headed in for the challenge.

"Hey, detective."

"What? Why are you here even on my day off, mystery freak? Don't you know that people need to periodically perform maintenance on and refresh their minds?"

"Heh heh heh. Now I get a fishing pond date with you. …But what's with that vegetable juice? Aren't you drinking that as an excuse rather than for your health or its nutrients? Are you trying to look good?"

"Shut up. Let me enjoy my time alone."

"C'mon, detective. They may be small, but these are bluefin tuna.

Do you really think you can eat one all on your own if you catch it? Look around you. It’s nothing but families and couples.”

“Shut up! It really hurts if you point it out!! I didn’t expect it to be like this before I got here!! I thought fishing was a man’s pastime. How casual has it gotten!?”

“Oh, look at your pole, detective. Something’s tugging really hard.”

That was a fishing pond for you. I frantically grabbed the fishing pole that was beginning to bend like a bow. Of course, the reel was electric and had a specialized program installed and a young instructor lady came running over when she saw I had caught something, so I did not actually need any real strength or skill to battle the tuna.

As the instructor reached for the fishing pole from behind me and gave me some literally hands on advice, the mystery freak glared at her.

“This system is not suited for couples. I just hope I don’t hear any of the same rumors as from those parks and amusement parks with famous ponds.”

As I ignored her nonsense and battled the tuna (or rather, enjoyed a recreation of battling it), something huge burst from the surface of the water with a splashing noise.

“Hyah!?” shouted the instructor woman in surprise.

She grabbed onto me from behind for some reason and the look in the mystery freak’s eyes grew even sharper.

I was surprised too.

But not because I had caught an unexpectedly large tuna.

This was not even a fish.

Hanging from the line was a girl wearing a short kimono and hagoromo who looked like something from an ancient picture book.

“G-gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh
I cried out as if I had done something horrible.

The girl in question’s expression did not change despite having a thick fishing hook in her mouth with her entire weight pressing down on it. She remained perfectly expressionless.

Wait…

“She isn’t bleeding? Wait, the hook isn’t even piercing her mouth?”

“Oh? She isn’t human,” said the mystery freak as if remembering something. “She’s a Youkai…or rather, a manmade Shikigami. I don’t know too much about that, so I couldn’t tell you how it works. But what I do know is she belongs to my sister. She’s the Deadly Dragon Princess.”

“She’s Mai’s?” I said in confusion.

The Deadly Dragon Princess gave little reaction. She simply swayed back and forth while hanging from the end of the fishing pole with the spear squid in her mouth. And for some reason she made the V-sign with both hands while still perfectly expressionless.

“But this is odd,” said the mystery freak.

“Everything about this is odd. I can’t think of a single thing about this that isn’t odd.”

“That’s not what I mean. My sister has a habit of saying she has *100% lost* if she has to use the Deadly Dragon Princess.”

That monster woman said that?

I had never sensed the slightest weakness from Hishigami Mai, so I could not imagine her ever facing a situation she could not handle.

“It’s twue,” added the Deadly Dragon Princes while being dragged up onto land by the electric reel.

She had likely meant “true”, but she was talking while chewing on the squid.

It was raw and still had its guts inside, so she was quite the wild “person”.

Eventually, the Deadly Dragon Princess spat something out like used gum. It was the powerful hook used to land 200 kilogram tunas, but it had been horribly crushed.

“Detective, the hook is tied into a bow.”

"Now that's a powerful kiss I want to avoid at all costs."

The Deadly Dragon Princess ignored our exchange and spoke with the expression of someone following a program.

"*Hishigami Mai has lost.* I have been instructed to pass on an emergency message."

"She lost…?"

"Yes."

"What are you supposed to tell us?"

"It is quite simple." With no change of expression, the Deadly Dragon Princess grabbed another spear squid from the cooler I had rented. "After she lost to them, an organization known as Akki Rasetsu took control of Hishigami Mai's physical body. She has become their puppet to use as a weapon. If you wish to save her, you must head to the Intellectual Village known as Noukotsu Village."

I sighed and covered my face in my hands. While looking over at the Deadly Dragon Princess who was eating my squid without permission, the mystery freak revealed an unnecessary piece of trivia.

"That's your hometown, isn't it, detective?"

"Why do you know my personal information?"

Part 3 (???)

A certain rest stop was located near an ordinary rural city.

The area’s economy had fallen into a slump so the public transportation facilities such as buses and trains had declined. This naturally made private automobiles a necessity to live in the area. Nothing could be seen but long runway-like stretches of road that naturally obstructed travel and further stagnated the economy. The stereotypical cycle of decline had kicked in.

An old black foreign car was parked at one end of a parking lot large enough to hold a soccer match on. It was a famous car from the ‘60s known as a Hitman Tuxedo, but a car like that would violate the exhaust standards if it was used as is on public roads. For that reason, the inner workings had been remade into a sanitary hybrid car. This was another of the classics businesses that also gave new life to old houses. The president of the custom workshop had claimed it took a lot of doing to produce such a deep noise of exhaust from such a thin engine. He had said the experience made him feel like an expert craftsman of brass instruments.

A man and a woman sat within the car.

The woman had her hair tied to either side of her head and was wearing a pink camisole, hot pants, and jacket. She was named Saijou. The muscular man had a blonde pompadour, wore a tank top and work pants, and had his shirt wrapped around his waist. His name was Nanjou.

Saijou Ai and Nanjou Kakeru were the two new leaders of Akki Rasetsu after they had taken control of the organization from the old leaders.

And…

A human sized piece of luggage was lying in the leg space of the backseat.

“Toujou-san is dead.”

“Yes, he is.”

One portion of the blue sky was blocked out by a long, narrow trail of smoke as if from a chimney. But in reality, this black smoke was coming from the remains of the prisoner transport vehicle carrying Toujou. It had been blown to smithereens while travelling along the highway.

They had not wanted to use something as flashy as a bomb in a country like Japan, but the vehicle had been armored. Anything that could be disguised as a natural accident would have no guarantee of killing their target.

While sitting in the left-side driver's seat, Saijou nervously tapped her index finger on the steering wheel.

"And Houjou-san was hung from a tree after his project in Kyoto failed."

"Does it really matter?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nature will decide the size of the organization. This is no different than how smaller groups of friends naturally form within a school. Those old idiots tried to expand the size of the organization to achieve their objectives, but they went too far. That causes internal rifts and makes it hard to come to agreement over anything. If you radicalize around a single objective, it is only natural for the organization to be automatically trimmed."

"Eh? Then the same goes for Toujou-san and Houjou-san?"

"Both of those were accidents, but the organization would have grown more condensed either way. In fact, regulating the number of people will improve the purity of our focus on a single goal. … We had become fat and bloated like Hyakki Yakou. They have 100 members at the level of leaders alone, which is just stupid. And I hear not even a third of them can even use the occult."

"I see," said Saijou with a less than satisfied expression.

She did think a problem existed as far as the percentages were concerned, but that was still 30 people who could wield the occult on a level feared as a natural disaster and with an exclusive shrine constructed toward suppressing their power. Even by the standards of their field of work, having that many of such people gathered in one group was not normal.

But she changed the subject instead of pursuing that further.

"What should we do next?"

"Houjou was an idiot who couldn't even protect himself, but he did give us an interesting report. *He found some interesting Youkai we can use in the Intellectual Village known as Noukotsu Village.*"

"I kind of liked Houjou-san."

"Well, you both work in similar ways. Not to mention that *you managed to make Hishigami Mai your own after picking her up injured in Kyoto.* He was the one that did that damage, so you should at least thank him. Not that it has anything to do with me." Nanjou looked in the rearview mirror to observe the backseat. "Speaking of which, is this really safe?"

"*Mai-chan* will be just fine. Her entire body is bound by Kosode no Te."

"That's a kimono Youkai that curses anyone who wears it, right?"

"Exactly. I made plenty of copies of one and attached them all over *Mai-chan*. The controller is running properly, so there is nothing to worry about." Saijou casually turned the conversation back on track. "So what are we going to do? Should we head to that Intellectual Village Houjou-san visited?"

"Well, if we find the Youkai he spotted, we should be able to assemble what we have been hoping for."

Saijou spread out a paper map to check on the location of Noukotsu Village. She did not use a convenient GPS system because she did not want a third party using it to track their location. This hybrid Hitman Tuxedo was not a rental car or stolen car she was willing to abandon.

"Oh, right," said Saijou Ai as she looked at the map like a father reading the newspaper at the breakfast table.

Nanjou Kakeru frowned and asked, "What?"

"You said those old men, Houjou-san, and Toujou-san were purged in the automatic adjustments to the optimal size for the organization, right?"

“What about it?”

“In that case, isn’t it a bit odd for Akki Rasetsu to have two leaders left? It seems to me just the Saijou group or just the Nanjou group would be enough.”

“…”

“…”

The sound of something soft being crushed exploded out within the car.

Saijou Ai pulled out a sleeping bag, stuffed a human-sized mass inside, and threw it into the backseat.

She then said, “It’s getting a bit crowded back there, but bear with it, *Mai-chan.*”

That famous ‘60s car called the Hitman Tuxedo let out its low rumbling one could feel in the gut as it left the rest stop’s large parking lot. The black foreign car smoothly began its journey to the Intellectual Village known as Noukotsu Village.

Part 4 (Jinnai Shinobu)

Noukotsu Village is a bit of an ominous name, isn't it?[1]

That thought about my hometown came to me thanks to a slightly belated summer greeting postcard. It had come via ridiculously expensive airmail.

Couldn't they just send an email?

Oddly enough, the postcard was addressed to the Succubus rather than the Jinnai household. It just outright had "Succubus" written on it. And the sender was…unknown. It just had a weird string of numbers in that field.

At any rate, I made my way up to the attic and asked the micro bikini-wearing demon.

She smiled and replied, "It's from an old friend. She's an old demon, so she likes old systems. Of course this is an age where quantum computers could soon be a reality, so I'm amazed she thinks a simple numerical replacement for the letters while be enough to hide her true name. …But I wonder how she figured out I'm here."

"Hm. So who is she?"

"Tselika Wien Alpha Chely-…wait, stop that! Asking for a demon's name will not end well for you. This is no fairy tale!"

It seemed the world of demons had its own problems. There was no point in asking further, so I quickly changed the subject.

"So where is this picture from?"

"A place not far from Paris. They have some wonderful catacombs there…"

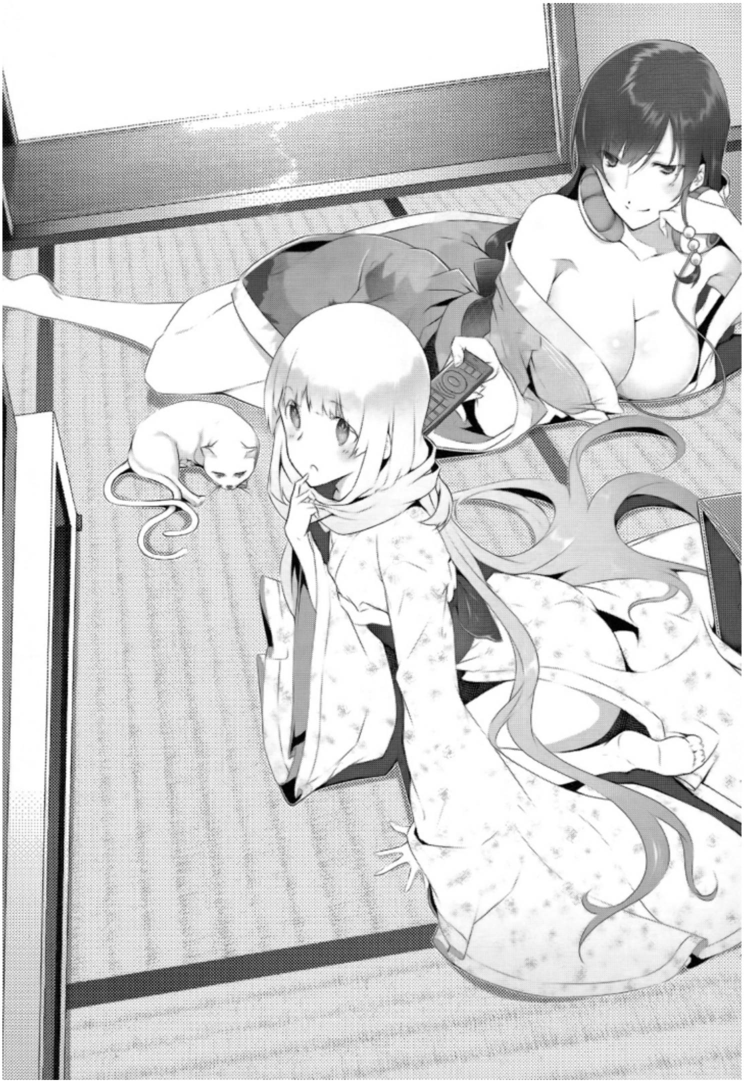
The Succubus looked spellbound with the idea, but I was not entirely sure what catacombs were.

After reading the text, she handed the postcard back to me in disinterest. I walked down the long hallway and to the western style living room where I found the glamorous Zashiki Warashi lying on the floor watching TV with the Yuki Onna. There was a TV in her room as well, but it was hard to resist the draw of this larger screen.

They seemed to be watching a rerun of a quiz show.

“The topic is Australia’s circular farms. These green plains look quite mysterious in the middle of the vast desert. Now for your question. What percentage of the world’s wheat is grown on them!? You have three possible answers and those of you at home can play along with your terrestrial digital remote controls!!”

I tossed the postcard into a postcard storage box no one used much anymore. As I did, the overall flat Yuki Onna spoke to me expressionlessly.



"Listen to this. They're horrible. They're all so horrible…"

"What happened?"

"They have been using the remote to take part in the quiz game, but they won't let me have a turn."

"Isn't this a rerun?"

"And that untidy Youkai lying there always says the answer right before the host does…"

"Like I said, it's a rerun."

But what fun is it to watch a quiz show if you know all the answers already?

"The answer is the biggest option: 25%! Surprising, isn't it? But the people of Australia think it is not enough. There are a some problems such as cyclones and an outbreak of locusts, but with some help from Japanese technology…"

The Zashiki Warashi must have grown tired of teasing the Yuki Onna because she made me her new target.

"Shinobu, I want a popsicle."

"What?"

"Carry me."

I had no choice but to take that indoor Youkai to the kitchen by rolling her along the floor like a metal drum tipped on its side. This did some interesting things to the hem and collar of her Yukata, but she did not seem to mind showing off that much skin.

She calmly said, "We just can't win with numbers alone, can we?"

"Are you talking about Australia? They use large scale farming where the seeds are sown from an airplane. A country like this where you have a hard time finding land where the horizon is visible has no chance of winning. Due to the race for the lowest prices, the beef, rice, and onions in the gyudon you buy will probably all come from Australia."

However, it was hard to manually manage such vast amounts of farmland, so I had heard they would rent a farming infrastructure with technicians included that used precision equipment made in Japan and Korea. This created a strange situation where the Japanese were importing crops grown by other Japanese in foreign countries.

After complaining that the Zashiki Warashi got a yogurt despite saying she had wanted a popsicle, my overall small granny entered the kitchen.

“Shinobu, Shinobu.”

“What is it, granny?”

“I think there are more trees in the yard than usual.”

“…What?”

“I do not really understand, but it might be a Youkai.”

I was not sure what she meant, so I had her and the Zashiki Warashi wait in the kitchen while I headed for the yard.

I put on a pair of beach sandals and stepped off of the long porch.

“What is this giant tropical looking tree?”

There was indeed an extra tree. It was obviously a different type of plant from those around it and it was growing right in the middle of the small path between the parking spot and the yard, so it could not have been more in the way. Anyone would notice a tree growing here.

This out-of-place feeling and strange sense of caution I felt for an unfamiliar plant likely came from living in an Intellectual Village. Just as stocking a river with black bass could destroy the river’s ecosystem, a living thing that did not fit the village’s colors was a scary thing.

And then some cat-sized creature poked its head out from behind the mysterious tropical tree.

But the creature’s face was oddly stern.

“Good day. I am Shisa.”

“Eh? Shisa!?”

“This Chinese banyan tree is Kijimuna. He is my friend.”

“Wait, wait! Let’s go through this one at a time. Is a Shisa even a Youkai? I thought the term Shisa referred to the statues themselves and not some creature they were modeled after. Y’know, like the Komainu at a Shinto shrine.”

It was also possible this was technically not a Shisa but a Tsukumogami of a Shisa statue, but I had no way of knowing which it was.

However, the Shisa did not seem the type to listen to what people said.

“I am from Okinawa, so I have never seen snow. I heard from some travelling Youkai that I could find a Yuki Onna if I came here. Have her make it snow.”

“Hey! What the hell happened to our household’s privacy!?”

“Here is some awamori as a gift. Give it to your parents. …It is not for children, okay?”

Having said that, the Shisa (?) jumped up onto the porch and entered the house without permission. He was so bold about it that I let it happen without thinking.

After being left behind, I looked up at that tree that was a type of mangrove.

“If you’re a proper Youkai, you won’t mess with the ecosystem of the normal plants around here…will you?”

The branches shook, making a rustling noise, but I did not know if that was a yes or no.

“At any rate, you’re kind of in the way here, so could you head further back in the yard while you wait?”

After more rustling, it began moving. But rather than walking on legs, the movement was more like all of its roots were snakes.

It may have gotten into a turf war with the Furutsubaki in the back of the yard because it began that odd rustling again. (By the way, the Furutsubaki would occasionally transform into a beautiful woman, but it was not the type that killed people. My Youkai-loving mom hand picked it up from somewhere.) But before I could focus on the two Youkai trees, I heard a commotion coming from the thatch-roof house.

In fact, the Yuki Onna ran out barefoot into the yard with Xs for eyes.

“Wh-what is this all of a sudden!? You’re making everything too hot!! I don’t know who you are, but I think we are horribly incompatible!!”

“I am Shisa.”

“I was not asking for your name!”

“I want to make an igloo. Make it snow.”

The Shisa (?) continued to not listen to anything anyone said as the Yuki Onna scurried over to cling to me.

“P-please do something about him!!” she begged me.

Yeah…

But…

“Apparently, he’s never seen snow before, so he came here all the way from Okinawa. Can’t you at least make it snow for him?”

“Kh… By any chance do you have a fetish for being NTRed away from people? A-and an animal fetish…?”

It seemed the Yuki Onna had made an incredibly rude misunderstanding, but she was in no state to be corrected while she was being chased around by that symbol of summer. She was running around the yard with the hem of her white kimono trailing along the ground behind her.

If she really can’t stand being around him, I need to create a way for them to talk this out…

But as soon as I had that thought, my cell phone rang. This was a brand new model because my old one had broken after being soaked in water.

“Eh? What do you need, uncle?”

After a short exchange, I frowned.

“I see. So you’re on your way here?”

Part 5 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

Unfortunately, there was no way I had any paid leave left.

However, the Shikigami sent by Hishigami Mai did not care in the slightest about the problems of a working man.

“Please begin searching for Hishigami Mai right away. If you do not, I will kill you,” said the Deadly Dragon Princess bluntly.

No matter how unreasonable this seemed, I had no chance if it came down to a competition of physical strength. And I could hardly go into work with that Deadly Dragon Princess tagging along 24/7. I was ultimately forced to lie and say my wounds from the Jinmensou case had reopened.

Of course, I didn’t have any paid sick days left either, so this was eating away at my already low pay.

At any rate, I travelled to Noukotsu Village.

As I stepped out onto the platform of the village’s one unmanned train station, I looked up at the midsummer sun and grimaced.

“…So I’ve come back here yet again.”

The first problem facing me was the combination of having a lot of luggage and the station’s lack of a bus stop or taxi loading area. However, I had called Shinobu ahead of time, so the real question was who would be sent to meet me. My older brother was a man who focused 100% on his work, so he would never leave his brewing facility. With any luck, my old man would come pick me up in his car, but…

“Well, there’s not much chance of that happening. I guess I’ll just walk to the house.”

“S-so I will finally get to greet your parents, detective!?”

“What are you doing here, mystery freak?”

The girl-shaped Deadly Dragon Princess was clinging to my back and silently eating some squid snacks, but I had not noticed Enbi until she had spoken to me on the platform. Had she tailed me like a true mystery freak?

She lightly waved her index finger back and forth and said, “For once, my sister is actually in a real pinch. This is actually more my issue than yours, detective.”

“Then do something about this Shikigami. And while you’re at it, how about you stay away from me too?”

But I was not even sure if the village even had an inn. Even if it did, I did not know if Enbi could afford it. That meant keeping her from traveling with me would force her to sleep on the streets. Forcing a teenage girl to do that for my own personal reasons went against everything I believed a police officer should be. And of course, thinking that way was falling right into the mystery freak’s trap.

As I held my head in one hand, I dragged my travel bag along and walked toward the ticket gate.

I was already feeling irritated when I heard the grating high-pitched voice of a female announcer coming from some TV.

“Blueprint of a Hit is on at Thursday at 7:00!! This week we will approach the secrets of Daikawara-san, the producer of the beautiful Onmyouji girls unit Seman Stars! We will reveal the trick to coming up with the group’s novel ideas such as the skillful blend of idols and spiritual mystique as well as the unique fan service of giving individual fortune tellings instead of a simple handshaking event! Don’t miss it!!”

I looked over to find the mystery freak had turned on the 1seg TV function of her cell phone.

“Wow, this is really is the middle of nowhere. There are almost no TV channels. All the commercial broadcasting is covered by a single local station.”

“You can order any show you want to watch over satellite or the internet.”

“What do you think of Seman Stars? Don’t you think Tarot Girls 22 is cuter?”

“There are too many of them, so I can’t keep track. Add in the backups and there are 56 of them, right?”

Sitting around at the empty station forever would do no one any good, so I began walking along the paved road with the Deadly Dragon Princess still clinging to my back. The mystery freak would stick with me whether I said anything or not, but I was having trouble deciding whether that was convenient or presumptuous.

The midsummer sun was so hot that I seriously began to wonder if it was not a mirage I was seeing and the road was really melting. Nevertheless, I continued to walk across the asphalt and toward my family home. The distance and heat must have been too much even for the mystery freak because she said nothing as we walked.

The Deadly Dragon Princess was clinging to my back and forcing her entire weight onto me, so my strength was being worn down quite quickly. It reminded me of poison damage in an RPG.

"Ahhh!! Detective, are there no cafes or family restaurants around here?"

"Give it up. This village only has a sweets shop. If you need a rest, there's a bus stop with a roof not far up ahead."

"This is horrible! Is this really part of Japan!?"

"I moved to the city to get away from this, so complain to someone else."

As soon as we finally arrived at the bus stop, the mystery freak practically flung herself onto the bench but then started writhing around on top of that natural frying pan that had been heated by the sun.

"Hgywaaaaahhhh!?"

"Your problem is that you're the type of mystery freak whose brain stops working altogether when you don't have a case to solve. Why couldn't you at least guess that the angle of the sun can still let it reach the bench despite the roof?"

"U-uuhhh… This is just cruel. *There's water so nearby yet I can't drink it.*"

"Huh? *What is this doing in an Intellectual Village?*" I muttered as I approached the object.

And that turned out to be a deadly mistake.

Part 6 (Jinnai Shinobu)

Despite emphasizing how soon he would be here over the phone, my uncle never arrived. I frowned and called him back a few times, but I couldn't reach him.

"What is going on?"

Had he run into some kind of trouble?

Noukotsu Village had an extremely slow train schedule. Counting both directions, only 5 trains came through in a day. One of those should have arrived at the station already. If my uncle had been on that train, he should have arrived in the city by now.

"Hmm… Maybe I should go down to the station to check."

I had hoped someone would go with me, but the Zashiki Warashi's policy was to refuse to do anything that would be too much of a bother and the Yuki Onna did not want to head out into the hot sun. As I looked around in search of someone to rope into going with me, the Nekomata turned away from me.

Is this because of how Youkai naturally hate my uncle so much?

"Oh, that's right. We've got a demon in addition to these Youkai."

And so I headed up to the attic using the steep and narrow wooden stairs that were practically a ladder.

The house was quite large and the attic was not divided into individual rooms, so it contained a decent amount of space. However, it had a dank and stuffy impression due to not being a proper living space, so it was not a place I liked going to.

But Youkai and demons tended to like places humans found uncomfortable, so it was quite well liked by them.

"The answer is #3: 50 countries!! The worldwide agricultural revolution focused on Australia is known as the International Plantation Project. Vast land is used to grow the specialties of countries the world over, such as Brazilian coffee, French grapes, and German potatoes. The standard is to use circular farms, but some crops use a combination of perfectly enclosed plant factories and megasolar facilities…”

It seemed the Succubus was watching the same quiz show rerun the Yuki Onna had been. I could hear the voice of the announcer who was known as the trivia king.

While standing on that steep ladder-like staircase, I stuck my head into the square attic. For some reason, the Succubus was sitting with her legs spread in an M-shape as if waiting for me. If I had been careless, my face would have run right in the center point of the M.

“What are you doing?”

“Just watching TV. Why do you ask?”

It seemed that sitting like that was as natural to her as sitting in the seiza style or cross-legged. After I explained the situation, she rolled backwards with her legs still spread in an M-shape. The movement somehow reminded me of a dead cicada.

“Demons prefer the darkness and Succubi rule over the night and dreams!! Why would you ever think I would go on a healthy walk under the midsummer sun!?”

Apparently, my uncle’s nature worked long range and was just as effective on Western monsters as Eastern ones.

I ultimately had no choice but to head for the station alone.

As soon as I stepped outside, I was reminded just how unbearable the direct sunlight was. For an instant, I considered taking a page out of those Youkai’s book and turning right back into the house, but I managed to resist.

I borrowed the Zashiki Warashi’s electric stickboard and took off down the farm road that was barely wide enough for two light trucks to pass each other.

“There are no stores on the way, so there’s almost no chance he took a detour.”

I raced alongside rice paddies filled with rice plants swaying in the wind as I took the shortest route to the train station. Someone must have been hunting down some dangerous animal because I heard what sounded like gunshots coming from the mountain. The old man who lived next door would sometimes share some boar meat with us, so I did not find it to be an unpleasant sound.

And then…

“?”

I spotted something sparkling on the side of the road. I ignored it, but I saw something else reflecting the sunlight a bit further on. After spotting three or four similar objects, I started to think it was strange.

What are those things?

They were objects I had seen on TV.

But…

“A cat-repellent water bottle?”[2]

I stopped the electric stickboard to check. The label had been removed from the plastic bottle and it was filled with water. I had often seen them placed in front of urban houses on TV.

But they were rarely used in Intellectual Villages.

For one, there was no scientific or zoological evidence they worked. Also, filling a round plastic bottle with water allowed it to function like a lens. When placed under the sun, it could easily start a fire.

Intellectual Villages thoroughly regulated their environment with all sorts of technology, so they had ways of more efficiently and effectively keeping stray cats away.

After all, this was where a bunch of grapes cost 30 thousand yen. When you could almost say that money did grow on trees, you would never protect those trees with mere superstition.

“What is this doing here?”

In my confusion, I approached the cat-repellent water bottle to get a closer look.

And then…

“No, Shinobu!! If you approach that, you’ll be caught in it too!!”

There was nothing he could have done.

By the time I heard my uncle’s voice, I had already been caught in the Package.

Part 7 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit, shit!!

I had been so focused on being caught in the Package myself and searching for a way to escape this Youkai that I had been unable to stop a new sacrifice from appearing. And this was my nephew Shinobu. What rules did any supposed god use to run this world?

I frantically ran over to Shinobu but felt a dull pain run through my right ankle.

It felt like wooly caterpillars that a mere touch from would cause a rash had broken through the skin and burrowed into my body. It hurt, it itched, it was uncomfortable, and it filled me with revulsion. The negative feelings seemed enough to cover up the pure pain.

It was a string.

It was painfully clear that a spider's web had burrowed inside me.

"Uncle, what is-…!?"

Shinobu trailed off as his face twisted in pain and he frantically crouched down to hold his right ankle with both hands. He was obviously experiencing the same symptoms as us.

I shouted into the distance.

"Mystery freak, there's a water bottle over here too! We missed one!! Shinobu has been caught in the Package!!"

Hishigami Enbi and the Shikigami named the Deadly Dragon Princess approached. Those two, Shinobu, and I were the current group caught in the Package. If possible, I did not want anyone else to be added to that group, but…

"What is going on, uncle…?"

"It's a Jorougumo. Someone has set up a Package using that deadly Youkai," I replied in a bitter voice.

Once we had understood the details of the Package to a certain extent, we had started by gathering all of the water bottles set up around the village. Everyone who approached them would be caught inside the Package, but the mystery freak and I were already caught. Touching the bottles could not cause any more harm to us. We had hoped to retrieve them all before someone else fell victim to them, but that had not happened.

The mystery freak explained the situation to Shinobu.

“A Jorougumo is generally known as a Youkai that transforms into a beautiful woman during the day and sucks human blood as a giant spider at night. But this one seems to be a slightly different type. This is the Jorougumo said to appear at the Jouren Falls. The cat-repellent water bottles are a trap meant to apply the situation of ‘taking a rest next to the water’ to the target. *Anyone who spends a certain amount of time near one of the bottles is designated a target.* The bottles may even have actual water from the Jouren Falls inside.”

Simply passing by was no problem. However, if you stopped, the danger shot way up. We had not actually tested this, but the entire village would have been caught if the target simply had to approach within a certain distance.

“What exactly does this Youkai do?”

“It wraps its spider web around the ankle of any travelers resting near the waterfall and drags them into the waterfall basin to kill them. In the story, a traveler cut the web wrapped around his ankle and tied it around a tree stump to escape.”

Shinobu looked at me.

I shook my head and replied, “We’ve tried it. The web is invisible, but we can grab it. However, nothing happened even when we tried to tie it to the bus stop sign, the bench, or anything else. We even went to the mountain and found a stump, but that didn’t work either. We can remove it temporarily, but it reappears back around our ankle before long.”

Technically, it dug into our ankle in this Package instead of just around it.

“So they’ve altered that portion,” commented Shinobu.

The mystery freak sighed and said, “We don’t know who did this, but it is obvious what they are after. Either everyone caught dies or they must fight each other to the death. The person behind this wants us to make that ultimate choice."

"What? I don't know what the time limit for this is, but don't we just have to find what has been designated the 'stump' and reattach the web to that?"

"The problem is what that 'stump' is," I cut in. "The mystery freak wrapped her web around my ankle as a joke, but that was the only time it did not reappear on her. …It was kind of awkward, so she reattached it to her ankle."

"…Wait. You're kidding."

"The bastard that assembled this Jorougumo Package has cruelly set the other participants as the 'stump'."

As a police officer, this situation made me click my tongue, but it would have been unfair not to explain it.

"In other words, we have two options. We can wait until our time is up and all die, or we can force our web onto another participant before our time is up. Those are the only two options."

"I doubt there is a limit to the number of webs someone can have forced on them, so one death would be the best we can hope for," added the mystery freak.

Naturally, no one wanted to be thrown into a deadly game of musical chairs.

That would decide who the sacrifice would be by a truly primitive method. In other words, all the participants would try to kill each other, forcing all the damage onto the weakest one.

Shinobu looked back down at his ankle and said, "By the way, how exactly will we be killed once our time is up?"

"We don't know. Since the story is about being dragged into a waterfall basin, drowning or falling from a great height would make the most sense, but the Jorougumo is a bloodsucking Youkai. And since the stump was pulled from the ground and dragged into the basin, being crushed to death may also be possible."

The only question was what the criminal wanted from this.

A rural area like an Intellectual Village had few main roads, so it would not be hard to catch someone in the Package by setting up the water bottles along those. However, it would be difficult to catch a specific target.

Was this nothing but indiscriminate murder?

Packages were developed by groups of dozens or even hundreds, so it seemed unlikely one would be built around the pleasure of an individual.

"I have a question," said Hishigami Mai's Shikigami all of a sudden. "A web has been attached to my ankle as well, but can this Jorougumo kill a Shikigami?"

"I'm not a specialist, so I couldn't tell you," replied the mystery freak. "But if this was assembled under the assumption that it would be killing humans, the damage set to drown or crush the victim might not be enough to kill you."

"I agree. And with that settled…"

"?"

We all focused on the Deadly Dragon Princess.

The Shikigami then said, "*All of you can attach your webs to me. That will allow you to escape this danger. Even if my core structure is destroyed, I can be remade if you manage to rescue Hishigami Mai."*

The last resort.

Once it was suggested, there was no point in rejecting it.

If time ran out with the webs still around all of our ankles, we would all die. The Package was put together to kill every last one of us. Denying that last resort would only increase the number of victims.

For that reason, the Deadly Dragon Princess's view was not wrong.

It was not wrong.

However…

"We can't, uncle." As expected, my nephew Shinobu spoke up. Even if it was being idealistic, I felt he should be proud of still being able to say that here. “There has to be another way! A Package is a much larger system than it appears, so there are a lot of gears that can be removed. If we can find one of those, we won’t have to make this choice like the criminal wants us to!!”

“But we have no way of knowing if we will succeed before time runs out. In fact, we do not even know the full scope of this Package. We have not even narrowed down who the suspects might be. If we begin gathering information now, we will never finish in time.” The mystery freak’s words stabbed at him coolly. “From the state of our ankles, the detective and I only have about 10 minutes left. The time limit meaning our deaths may be after that, but the web digging into our ankles will be too much for us soon. This strange itching is spreading so much it feels like my ankle is suffering necrosis.”

“…”

“Shinobu, don’t worry. The limit will clearly come for us first. If worst comes to worst, you can attach your web to one of us. You at least can survive this.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to say!!”

I knew that he was trying to correct a fundamental mistake.

But we did not have time.

“We of course want to do whatever we can too. But think about what could happen. We are the first wave and you are the second. If you wait around until the entire first wave is gone, you will be the only person left. Once that happens, *you will have no one to attach your web to.*”

Shinobu gritted his teeth and looked over at the Deadly Dragon Princess.

That monster looked like a slender girl.

“I will be fine,” she said to Shinobu expressionlessly. “No Youkai is used in my construction. I am a Shikigami designed from the ground up with organic material. If my physical body is destroyed, it can simply be exchanged for anoth-*ghh.*”

She misspoke at the end after biting her tongue.

Or so it seemed.

A slender and lithe arm pierced through the Deadly Dragon Princess's back and out of the center of her chest.

What?

Who did that?

When did they approach?

I belatedly realized that asking those obvious questions was getting my priorities out of order.

If what the Deadly Dragon Princess had said was accurate, she was a Shikigami, an artificial Youkai, created by Hishigami Mai.

Normal methods would never be enough to kill her, so how had a human killed her barehanded?

"According to my sister," Hishigami Enbi's lips trembled as she spoke, "the Deadly Dragon Princess is a model case for a potential enemy. She assumed she would be able to stand up to most any Youkai if she redesigned her own body so she could defeat it with a single punch."

That means…

The most likely candidate for who had destroyed the Shikigami in a single strike was…

"Hishigami Mai!?" shouted all three of us almost in unison.

The attacker pulled her slender arm out from the Deadly Dragon Princess's back and casually tossed the wreckage to the side. The Deadly Dragon Princess had said she would be fine if she was destroyed, but I had no way of knowing how true that was.

And I could not even focus on her battered form.

Every nerve in my body refused to let me look away from the attacker.

The attacker was indeed Hishigami Mai. I recognized the bloody arm and the hair that had been damaged by direct sunlight. However, I had never seen that look on her face. And half of her body was covered.

Covered in what, you ask?

Covered in Japanese paper used for calligraphy. Or perhaps you would call them magic charms. At any rate, about half of her body was covered with Japanese paper with strange writing on it. We had not exchanged a single word, but it was obvious that Mai was not her usual self. It was possible she could not even hear us. She looked like spell words congealed into a human form.

The Jorougumo Package had been unbeatable enough already.

And now the trump card we could use as a last resort had been destroyed.

Plus the enemy that now faced us was the worst possible enemy I could think of.

“We can’t win,” I calmly analyzed. Neither Shinobu nor the mystery freak attempted to argue. “Don’t try to fight her!! Our top priority is finding a way to escape this Jorougumo Package!!”

To make sure we were not all killed at once, we ran off in three different directions.

Hishigami Mai would likely pursue one of us.

This was like a game of musical chairs.

If we wanted to survive, we had to choose at least one person to die.

A much more direct, obvious, and horrible choice than the Jorougumo Package had presented itself.

Part 8 (Jinnai Shinobu)

In the end, I was cornered before I had been able to resolve anything.

This was Hishigami Mai.

She was the worst possible person I could think of to have as an enemy. I had run toward the mountain to get away from her.

But that may have been a mistake.

Then again, there may not have been a correct answer when it came to confronting that monster of a woman.

“Shinobu!!”

My uncle called from somewhere.

He must have run after me because he was worried about me. Or so I thought at first. Doubt came soon after.

The final trump card that had existed ever since my uncle and that twintailed girl were caught in the Package was now gone. That Youkai(?) known as the Deadly Dragon Princess could no longer be given all of our webs. To escape the Package before the time limit, my uncle, the twintailed girl, and I had to force our Jorougumo web onto one of the others.

It was possible he had changed his plan.

My uncle and the twintailed girl had fallen into the Jorougumo Package before I had. That of course meant they had less time than me. They might want to force their webs onto me “for the moment” since I had more time.

If we then found a new way out of the Package, that was fine.

But what if we did not find one?

Once all the webs had been temporarily forced onto me, the only option would be my death.

“…”

I did not respond to my uncle’s cry. I couldn’t!

I could not decide whether I should hold my breath and stay where I was or run off at full speed despite the noise it would make. When it came down to pure violence, a normal high school student like me did not stand a chance against a professional police detective like my uncle. And he might also have a handgun.

If he shot me in the leg, my options would drop considerably.

I can’t risk agreeing to my uncle’s compromise.

But just as I thought that….

“*Shinobu!! Don’t go that way! She’s coming!!*”

“Eh…?”

I had grown so lost in my suspicions that it took me too long to realize what my uncle meant. And my enemy did not overlook that mistake.

A sound exploded out from my body as if something solid had been knocked out of place.

I could not turn my head around to check behind me, much less continue standing. The best I could manage was twisting my waist around as I collapsed to the grassy-smelling dirt.

Only once I was lying on my back did I catch a glimpse of who had attacked me.

It was that monster of a woman who had half her body covered in Japanese paper or magic charms.

Somehow, she did not seem all there. It looked like she was sleepwalking.

“…Hishigami…Mai…?”

She gave no response.

She crouched down as if to peer at my face and her hands reached out for my neck. I tried to twist my body around to escape, but I could no longer move properly.

She showed no mercy.

She brought her hands in as if to strangle a chicken.

And then my heart truly did stop beating.

Part 9 (???)

Something out of place was mixed into the gentle atmosphere of Noukotsu Village. Saijou Ai hummed as she looked at her cell phone and leaned against the side of her black luxury car known as a Hitman Tuxedo.

The text on the screen was short, but absolute and accurate.

“Jinnai Shinobu: Confirmed dead.”

“Uchimaku Hayabusa: Confirmed dead.”

“Hishigami Enbi: Confirmed dead.”

The possibility was incredibly low, but it was possible Hishigami Mai could have left Saijou’s control and was now sending false information. However, that may have been worrying too much. And Saijou Ai held the core of the Jorougumo Package.

She wore a glove that appeared to be made of a thin silk.

Technically, it was spider silk woven into the form of a glove using the same techniques used for making violin strings.

It had originally been made along with the Jorougumo Package for a perverted nouveau riche old man who wanted to play the gamemaster in a killing game. The spider web glove that stuck to the palm reacted to the emotional disturbance of the game participants and reproduced them as virtual feelings. Basically, it let the wearer “feel” the death agonies of the players.

The perverted old man had absolutely loved the idea of holding people’s invisible souls in his hand, but he had ended up taking part in the game as a player after he failed to pay the *fairly expensive* rental price.

At any rate, the glove could be used to check on the progress of the Package by seeing who was dead and who was still alive. The Jorougumo would continue hunting its target until that target was dead.

All feeling had left the glove.

It was receiving no response from any of the players.

The arrival of the three emails had matched perfectly with the disappearance of the feeling.

This confirmed that Hishigami Mai was still under Saijou Ai's control and she had quickly killed every player, including her own sister.

But…

"Really, it could have been anyone," muttered Saijou Ai casually.

She had merely needed to cause a commotion within Noukotsu Village. That had been the point of the Jorougumo Package that forced people to kill each other, and that had been the point of Hishigami Mai.

She had actually wanted to get more people involved and use the Jorougumo Package to *alter the atmosphere of the entire village*, but this was enough. A diversion was meant to be abandoned anyway. As long as the true objective was achieved in the meantime, everything would work out in the end.

Her specialty was not sneaking deep into enemy ranks like a ninja from the Sengoku period. She instead created a flashy commotion and moved along in its shadow. Houjou and Toujou had often said she was like a stun grenade, but they were dead now.

"…"

Someone approached slowly as if sleepwalking.

Hishigami Mai looked to be in a horrible state with half of her body covered in magical charms that looked like Japanese paper. Technically, they were not charms but Youkai represented in textual form. Saijou Ai was well known among certain enthusiasts as a calligrapher who created nothing but ominous works.

Her methods were similar to Houjou's as he sealed power within Youkai art. It was said that kanji had been originally created by simplifying pictures, so this was not too surprising.

She had created hundreds of Youkai curses which were now robbing Hishigami Mai of control of her body.

The blood splattered on Hishigami Mai's body symbolized how far she had fallen.

That was the blood of those who had once been her companions or family.

This further confirmed what the emails and the Jorougumo glove had said.

She had shown no mercy.

She had slaughtered all of them and returned to Saijou Ai.

Saijou's commands were absolute.

No matter how much of an expert Hishigami Mai was, she could not escape this curse.

Saijou waved at her.

"Are you done?"

"…Are you?"

"I swiped them while you were having your fun, Mai-chan."

Something banged on the inside of the Hitman Tuxedo's trunk. Two Youkai that had been living in Noukotsu Village were contained inside.

"An Umbrella Obake and a Lantern Obake. …I doubt many people in Japan know just how important these Youkai are, but *Youkai that have no set purpose are quite rare and are quite valuable.*"

There was a Youkai known as Nurarihyon.

This Youkai was known as the leader of every Youkai in Japan. However, that characteristic had mostly been created by humans.

It had originally been a type of ocean Youkai, but no one had known what it did.

And it could be freely remade into almost anything because its role was not decided.

In other words…

Depending on the situation, the Umbrella Obake and Lantern Obake could be remade in the same way.

They could be remade into a controller that could command any Youkai in Japan.

“And on top of that, the Umbrella Obake and Lantern Obake are Tsukumogami. They are the type of Youkai that gain power the longer they are kept as possessions. That means I can make them change in convenient ways if I arrange their surrounding environment correctly. You could view it like a storehouse for wine or cheese.”

The Hitman Tuxedo’s trunk had already been remodeled for that purpose. The Umbrella Obake and Lantern Obake stored within would likely become Youkai controllers in about half a year.

Once a single trivial problem was dealt with, that is.

“Mai-chan, may I ask one last task of you?”

“Ask me anything.”

“A child named Yonesaki Hiro lives in this Intellectual Village. Kill him. The Umbrella Obake and Lantern Obake only have value as neutral Youkai that hold no purpose, but it seems they have taken on the role of protecting their family. The purity of the final product should rise if that is completely destroyed before the assembly begins.”

“Understood,” she easily and readily replied.

Her killing techniques were valuable enough for Hyakki Yakou to frequently hire her. If she obeyed this command and used those techniques to their fullest, it was obvious what would become of Yonesaki Hiro.

Once Yonesaki Hiro was killed by Hishigami Mai and they escaped from Noukotsu Village with the Umbrella Obake and Lantern Obake, Saijou’s objective would be complete.

The ultimate objective of Akki Rasetsu – which was now only Saijou Ai – was to perfectly fuse a human and a Youkai. She wished to obtain a physical body that was not bound by a lifespan and could ignore the laws and systems of the human world. However, she needed to create a controller to safely and surely gather plenty of sample Youkai. It was the bare minimum to ensure she was not killed by her own prey.

“I will be going then.”

“Finish this quickly.”

“Of course.”

Saijou Ai did not make a habit of seeing puppets off.

She turned away from the pathetic loser and began thinking about her upcoming path to success.

And then…

Hishigami Mai’s slender arm mercilessly stabbed into Saijou Ai’s side.

Part 10 (Hishigami Mai)

"…Hh…Gh…?"

I heard an odd voice.

What was it she found so confusing? The fact that a giant hole had just been opened in her side or the fact that the slender arm of a lady could do that?

Or was it that I, Hishigami Mai, was not under her control?

"B-bghh!? Cough cough!! Wh-why!? Ngh…bheh!?"

Disgusting.

You don't even hear noises like that when cleaning bath pipes.

"Saijou-chan, was it? Y'see, I thought there was something beyond Houjou in Kyoto. I figured I would hear plenty of information if I purposefully let myself be taken into the enemy ranks. I'm disappointed at how little depth I found. A controller for all Youkai? Transplanting an Umbrella Obake and Lantern Obake into the Nurarihyon method? That's much too shallow. If this is all that's left of Akki Rasetsu, I feel sorry for the old leaders you went to the trouble of purging."

I had of course made sure to tie up the loose ends before enacting this plan. I had sent the Sunekosuri to tell the Illness Magic User to help the Amemura family *move to a new home*.

"Hh…bh?"

"I had expected you to easily believe I had been defeated as long as I released my precious Deadly Dragon Princess to help out…but to be honest, this was too easy. If you're going to control my body, at least test it out with some sexual harassment."

C'mon, I'm going to the effort of explaining it to you.

Don't pass out yet. You have to hear me out.

"B-bfhh!! Cough cough!! Gygybh!! Hhy? Why? Y-you were… byhbh!? My Kosode no Te…were perfect…!!"

"Yes, yes. The Kosode no Te. That's a kimono Youkai that curses the wearer, right? Even if curses are difficult to avoid or defend against, it is relatively easy to deflect them into a different direction. Surely you know that the foundation of curse countermeasures is to deflect them back at the user, right? I was so covered in this Japanese paper that I was able to send the curses at each other, causing them to cancel out each other's effects."

"Jhbbh!?"

"So of course, I was never obeying your orders from the beginning. Yes, I stopped Jinnai Shinobu-kun's heart. The same with the detective and my sister. …But I resuscitated them after exactly 20 seconds. The Jorougumo Package excludes anyone who dies. *And it does not track what happens to people who have been excluded.*"

Thank you for falling for this so wonderfully.

But you can never survive in this world if that is all you have.

"If you really want to kill me, you either have to place the routes of the curses so I cannot calculate them or send in an overwhelming amount of curses like the Illness Magic User does. Get it now?"

"Bshbh!? Grgrh!! Gbhghchghrhbhjfbhfhjbhchbhrhfjdhcyehfhgyfjchhdfy!!!???"

"Those were some horrible curses and they have been running nonstop this whole time. The excess power has been building up like a bowstring being drawn. Let's just say it won't even leave behind a corpse."

I began removing the cheap magic charms attached to my body while paying no heed to Saijou-chan who had been *sucked up* down to the last drop of blood.

Wait, this is bad. If I take these off, I'll be naked. Um…Let's see. Oh. There's a blanket in the backseat of this ugly car. A gun too.

Now then…

It's Hishigami Mai-san's turn now.

My job would have been so much easier if defeating a smalltime villain like her was enough to bring an end to this incident.

Part 11 (Hishigami Mai)

I retrieved the Deadly Dragon Princess Shikigami I had released as decoy information needed to convince the enemy I had really lost. I then returned her to her “original world”.

Hmm, I did a nice job of destroying her. I need to make sure to fix her later.

From what I had caught a glimpse of while pretending to be controlled, it seemed that Shikigami had taken a liking to that detective. I had commanded her to stick with him, but she had gone farther than that. It was possible he had lured her in with her favorite food.

I had already resuscitated the detective, my sister, and Jinnai Shinobu-kun, so their lives were not in danger.

They arrived wanting an explanation, but I still had other things to do. I opened the trunk to Saijou-chan’s ugly foreign car.

Inside I found…

Ohh, what’s this!? They’re so cute!!

“Bwahh!! Wh-what is going on!? Why would you suddenly lock us in here!?”

“It is too hot in here! Especially with this Umbrella in here too!! … Wait. Who are you? Wh-why are your eyes glittering as you stare at us!?”

The Umbrella and Lantern who each had a single comical eye were shouting about something or other.

Oh, how wonderful.

It’s the same as with that Sunekosuri. It scares me how I lose all self control when I see these cute harmless Youkai.

As I watched the Umbrella and Lantern hurry back to their home, I said, “Now then. Time for the real problem.”

“What? I thought you defeated the person behind this. Did they get away???”

People sometimes made that mistake when I did not even leave a corpse behind.

But that was not the issue here.

“I pretended to have my body controlled to enter the organization named Akki Rasetsu. From what I saw and heard, it seems they were being supported by someone.”

“You mean like a patron?” asked my sister.

“No, nothing so well-defined. More like someone who was observing Saijou from afar and secretly eliminated any dangerous elements that might have gotten in Akki Rasetsu’s way. Akki Rasetsu probably had no idea this was happening.”

I doubted a group too dimwitted to notice the threat I posed could have detected “them”.

The detective frowned and said, “What does this ‘someone’ want to do?”

“I don’t know, but they definitely thought Akki Rasetsu’s project would benefit them. They snuck in this far for some clear objective, so they are not going to remain silent now. To be blunt, they will likely attack this Intellectual Village in place of Akki Rasetsu.” I glanced around the area. “Northeast, west, and south-southwest. Somewhere between 700 and 1000 meters away. I sense a few people watching us.”

“What?”

Jinnai Shinobu narrowed his eyes and stared into the distance to answer his question, but that careless action only made me sigh.

“It’s no use trying to see them from here. If you turn such obvious focus in their direction, they will hide. And if you do spot them, they might blow a hole right through the center of your body with a sniper rifle, so be careful.”

“…”

“Do you have any guesses as to who they are?” asked my sister.

“They seem like soldiers to me. From the way the unit is deployed and the way they hide themselves, I would guess SAS. I could narrow it down further if I could intercept their transmissions.”

Jinnai Shinobu looked confused.

“What’s SAS? Some kind of space defense force?”

“They are a British unit. However, they are seen as the standard for special forces, so plenty of other countries emulate them. They even have official lectures for the troops of countries allied with England, so this alone is not enough to know what organization is behind this.”

Of course, this was connected to the occult, so it was unlikely that this SAS-style special forces unit would be our only enemy. My guess was this enemy was on the level of an entire nation and so they could freely use special forces to support their project.

The detective sighed and said, “What are they doing here? If we figure out who they are and learn what they are after, could we use that to fight them off?”

“That is what I’m about to try.”

With that offhanded comment, I pulled out a device that looked like a cross between a cell phone and a radio.

It was my usual satellite phone.

My little sister frowned and said, “Who are you going to contact with that?”

“Hyakki Yakou, of course. They have the most information of this sort.”

Part 12 (???)

Hafuri, the girl of about ten who was the current head of Hyakki Yakou, sighed when she answered the phone. The tearoom in the flying wing cruising at an altitude of 9000 meters was still enough for that slight movement of air to be seen as a definite flow in the room's atmosphere.

"I had thought it was odd for it to be suggested to destroy the living environment of Noukotsu Village by disseminating hydrogen sulfide and making it look like a volcanic eruption. It seemed too forceful to simply put an end to Akki Rasetsu's project to take control of any Youkai in Japan. I did not like the idea of slaughtering those innocent villagers when it is our role to protect them."

"Hmm."

"That means a few of the 100 officers that took part in the meeting may have realized who is hidden behind this incident."

"Do you have any guesses who that might be? It should be someone who can freely use SAS-style special forces."

"*A witch most likely,*" replied Hafuri.

"That's what I thought. That is the most likely option for a foreign force. The real question is *what type of witch is it?*"

"Not a European or American one. They would have no reason to attack Japan. They confiscated most of our documents when we lost the war long ago. With all that detailed information, they would have no reason to sneak in and try to steal any data now."

"So it's a witch from somewhere else?"

"Witches have scattered all over the world, but we can narrow it down quite a bit since she is using SAS-style special forces. …And there just so happens to be one major country not in Europe or America with special forces based on the SAS."

"*I see.*"

Hafuri scratched her chin with the same small hand holding the phone receiver. The main problem was that some of the 100 officers knew about this. And that they had brought forward that ridiculous plan to destroy the Intellectual Village in response.

“The 100 officers may have chosen a rather forceful method of eliminating this person behind Akki Rasetsu,” she said.

“No, we need to assume the worst goes much deeper than that.”

“What do you mean?

“Hyakki Yakou’s meetings with the 100 officers are not contained to the flying wing, right? They use the internet and speak without showing their face. That prevents others from influencing their opinion, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then *it is possible some of the real officers have already been killed and replaced with someone else entirely.* Perhaps they are the ones behind Akki Rasetsu and they are having Hyakki Yakou take action to ensure their plan progresses smoothly. You lost a lot of the commanders in the confusion of that coup d’etat recently and had to replace them, so it wouldn’t have been that hard to take advantage of the situation.”

“True.” Hafuri gave a slight nod. “We have special software that can remove their anonymous state. The 100 officers do not know about it. We will use it to investigate this.”

“This is a group that uses decoys on top of decoys to hide their identity, so that alone may not be enough.”

“Then what do you say we should do?”

“Lay a much flashier trap. I’ll help you with that.”

“What should we do first?”

“For now, *approve the plan to destroy Noukotsu Village.* I’ll fill you in on the rest after you do.”

Part 13 (Jinnai Shinobu)

We left the foreign car used by the person from an underground group called Akki Rasetsu and walked back to my thatch-roof house. It seemed the Hishigami sisters intended to use it as their home base for the moment. Mai was only wearing a blanket for some reason, so she borrowed a yukata. The way she wore it still did not leave much to the imagination, though.

Just as I was hoping everything was settled, Hishigami Mai told us something unbelievable.

“What!? You had her give the go ahead for a project to slaughter everyone in the village!?”

“Don’t get so upset. This is a trap. We can’t fight back until we uncover the enemy. We must be defeated if we want to eliminate every enemy from this Intellectual Village, right? You just have to turn a blind eye to the slight risks involved.”

“So who is this enemy?”

“A witch strongly influenced by western methods. *Probably an Australian one.*”

“Why would someone like that do this? Is she trying to steal brand name fruit seeds from the Intellectual Village?”

“What they want is something more occult,” replied Hishigami Mai offhandedly.

She then grabbed the remote control for the television at one end of the Japanese-style living room and turned it on. She changed the channel to an afternoon talk show.

“Australia’s circular farms are having a large effect on the grains market, but recent cyclones and an outbreak of locusts has caused serious damage to their wheat crop. This has caused unrest to spread through the futures market and…”

“Come to think of it, they were talking about this on the quiz show rerun the Yuki Onna was watching. What about it?” I asked.

“Natural disasters and outbreaks of pests are stereotypical forms for divine punishment. Even Japan's ancient documents record several such incidents. With these incidents causing great damage in Australia, it is not too surprising that some have decided to put together a countermeasure."

"What does that have to do with Japan?"

"Australia is part of the new world just like America. But that is technically just what the Europeans decided to call it after they destroyed the cultures that already existed there. This of course angered the native god of the slighted land. This situation could easily lead to natural disasters, but the Australian government that ignored the older culture for so long has no idea how to pacify this god. After all, they have no scriptures to act as a manual." Hishigami Mai spun the TV remote around in her hand. "Akki Rasetsu, the organization I was dealing with, was looking for a method to control Youkai and gods. This Australian witch may have thought she could use that, but I think that was just a digression. *Her true goal lies elsewhere.*"

"…?"

"It's simple. Witches worship demons to borrow their power. …So what exactly are demons? There are two types: the pure species of demons and the altered forms of gods from other religions that have been registered as 'evil gods' by the world's largest religion which uses the cross as its symbol. Witch rituals come from those old religions as well. In that case…"

Nothing she was saying really clicked in my mind.

The expression on my face must have made that clear.

Hishigami Mai winked and gave me a further hint.

"They are especially skilled at twisting polytheistic religions. And what structure is created by the gods of this country?"

"You don't mean…"

"It's a stereotypical situation. A witch that wishes to use a god for her own purposes would find Shinto or Buddhism to be almost irresistible. That said, the process of turning a god into a usable demon does weaken the god a fair bit."

"So this witch's group wants to reconstruct a god of this country into the form known as a ‘demon’? So this is just like a Package where people build a Youkai into a system that makes use of one of that Youkai’s properties?”

“Exactly. That is why they want to slaughter everyone in the Intellectual Village by disseminating hydrogen sulfide disguised as volcanic gases. The most common reason for the downfall of gods the world over *is the destruction of the land they rule over.* By devastating an area of land within Japan, the witch’s group can affect the god in that area.”

“…But is it really that easy?”

“Old gods will naturally change into fairies and Youkai with the passage of the era. And that is especially true for polytheistic gods. That is why gods are enshrined in large temples and shrines to ensure they do not change form. But regardless of how difficult the method is, these are still gods we are talking about. They are the largest pillars supporting their cultures. If they fall, it could even cause damage to diplomatic relations.” Hishigami Mai shrugged. “Once a god has been turned into a demon, it can be used to suppress the old god wreaking havoc in Australia out of anger. … That will simply cause even more friction with the ancient culture, but the government only wants to protect the current system of society from further economic damage. They feel this is worth the risk. If they did not feel the situation was that dire, I doubt they would have ever contacted this witch in the first place.”

“That explains the government’s reasons. What about the witch?”

“The witch has something else to gain from this. *And we can use that as a trap.*”

Part 14 (Hishigami Mai)

This village would soon become a battlefield.

However, the flow of time in the thatch-roof house felt so slow you would never have guessed it. A Zashiki Warashi with excessively large breasts was flying a small toy modeled after an autogyro around the room to chase after a Yuki Onna who was running all over the place to avoid it. A Keseran Pasaran that looked like a white furball was floating around near the ceiling. It was curiously trying to approach the autogyro, but it could not keep up with the toy's speed.

The scene made it seem ridiculous to bring up the terms "Hyakki Yakou" or "agent".

What I saw before me was likely something I could never obtain as long as I immediately chose brute force as a means of resolving Youkai-related problems.

But then I spotted a familiar face among the Youkai.

The Youkai seemed to notice me as well and walked over. It was a white Nekomata that was overflowing with elegance.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I'd rather know why *you* are here. Is this the territory of a former ace of Inga Ouhou?"

Inga Ouhou had been a revenge group with three Itako leading it. They would give form to the residual thoughts of the dead to hear their voices and punish their murderers. I believe the organization came about due to displeasure with the current laws that disallowed Youkai testimony or evidence obtained via paranormal means from use in court. …But then the three Itako had started accepting money to freely alter what the dead told them. At that point, they became nothing more than an assassin group.

The Nekomata's master had been killed due to that cheating despite being a top member of Inga Ouhou. When I had been sent in to resolve some issues Hyakki Yakou was having with them, the two of us had destroyed the entire organization in just over two weeks.

I was left with one primary question.

“You have enough power to destroy an entire organization, so are you not going to use that power to help Jinnai Shinobu-kun?”

“I try not to rely on my power too much. My direct power is no more than that of a Doberman. I merely have the added bonus of being able to *transform into the person I bite to death.*”

That was why she did not fight her enemies head on. Instead, she would sneak into a group of enemies and slowly cause more and more victims. Her strategy was perfect for destroying a large organization from within by spreading doubt and suspicion. I quite liked her means of fighting.

“But the strength of a Doberman seems reliable enough for a normal high school student who can only arm himself with a bat or box cutter. Plus, blades and handguns are not enough to kill you.”

“There was a recent commotion in which a small lost boy fell into a flood control reservoir. He is the kind of idiot who jumped right into the water to search for that boy, but he still had no intention of involving the Yuki Onna or myself.”

“…”

“But it does not seem he has some admirable goal in it such as preventing any danger from approaching his ‘family’. He has no problem running to the Zashiki Warashi for help. …Basically, it is an issue of degree. If he asked a deadly Youkai like the Yuki Onna or me for help, things would get a bit *messy*. And once things get *messy*, there is no guarantee it can be neatly cleaned up.” Despite looking like a cat, the Nekomata formed an obvious smile as she spoke. “His reasons are nothing more than the irrational stubbornness of a child, but that does not mean it is always okay to make such a *mess* by sending in something like me. That is the way I see it. And so I will remain the cute pet that soothes the family. I will fool no one and I will kill no one. Understand?”

Having said that, the Nekomata walked off somewhere else. On her way, she chased after the light of a pen-shaped laser pointer Jinnai Shinobu was holding. She gave several cat punches to an empty wall.

Chehh…

I meaninglessly felt as if I had lost. I thought I had met a fellow killer for the first time in a while, but now I felt like I had spotted an old classmate pushing a stroller with her husband.

I grabbed a broom leaning against the wall, walked out into the hallway, and banged the handle against the ceiling partially to release my anger.

“Hey!! I know the Succubus from the European Security Force is up there!! If you want to live, start cooperating!!”

I then heard a lot of banging that was clearly not coming from the broom. It almost seemed like the attic was shaking.

You idiot. Did you really think Hyakki Yakou didn’t know you were here? The young lady has only been overlooking you out of respect for Jinnai Shinobu who did so much to quell Hyakki Yakou’s internal strife at that hotel in Fuuka Village.

The best thing to use against a western witch was a western demon.

With the final piece gathered, it was finally time to set the trap and settle this.

Part 15 (Jinnai Shinobu)

The final battle began smoothly.

It began with a comment by the glamorous Zashiki Warashi who was walking around using my smartphone as a music player as usual.

“Shinobu, you just got an email about an active volcano warning. Do you know what that means?”

“…That’s it!! That’s the camouflage warning on the notification network!!”

Even if it was only a decoy warning to make the hydrogen sulfide look like volcanic gases, it was a complete joke. They had obviously timed it so no one would make it out in time even with a car. And if we did move faster than expected, the SAS-style special forces would obviously do something to handle it.

Hishigami Mai brought her large satellite phone to her ear.

“This is going just as expected. Young lady, you’re flying right over us, right? *Jump down at the last second before the hydrogen sulfide is disseminated!!*”

I walked out to the thatch-roof house’s porch, put on my beach sandals, and walked out into the large yard. I looked up into the blue sky and spotted a large V-shaped passenger plane called a flying wing. Several smaller planes were flying around it to protect it.

Something was dropped from the flying wing.

At first I thought it was a bomb, but it was not. It was a girl wearing a kimono and a parachute.

Hishigami Mai had run outside with me and she now shouted into the satellite phone.

“Okay, good! Any member of Hyakki Yakou that puts the bloodline first will work to protect your life no matter what. In other words, they will do whatever they can to stop the hydrogen sulfide plan so you will not be killed. But the members of the Australian witch’s group mixed into the 100 officers will not care about that. *The ones who insist on continuing with the plan are our enemies.* Have all of them restrained!!"

I heard a low rumbling noise.

It did not belong to a gasoline engine. It was the engine sound effect added to electric cars as a safety measure.

It came from my grandfather's light truck, but my uncle was the one sitting in the driver's seat.

"Hey! The truck's ready!!"

"Understood. Everyone get in!! The witch's group will have noticed the young lady floating down. She is the leader of Japan's largest Youkai organization. Plus, she has plenty of information from ancient books. I don't know where the witch's group is hiding in the village, but they will jump at the chance to take her hostage. They will definitely want some of Hyakki Yakou's documents as supplementary material for their project to control a god!!"

I was worried, so I spoke up without thinking.

"Hey!! What exactly is a witch!?"

"Instead of using a Package that builds a Youkai's power into a system, they bring a portion of a demon's power into themselves. While a Youkai might be able to handle one, a witch's powers are incredibly effective against humans. And as much of an oddity as I may be, I have not left the category of a 'human'. *In a direct fight, we would probably be fairly evenly matched.*"

As I said before, my uncle was sitting in the light truck's driver's seat. The twintailed girl was in the passenger seat. Those were the only two seats, so Hishigami Mai and I climbed into the back of the truck.

"Okay, let's end this. Let's crush the witch's group that will have gotten greedy and gathered at the young lady's landing spot!!"

Part 16 (Jinnai Shinobu)

My uncle drove the electric truck down the narrow farm road with rice paddies on either side. The twintailed girl in the passenger seat followed the path of the parachute with binoculars.

“Oh, dear. …She’s being blown away! She’s going to end up on the mountain at this rate, detective!!”

“That’s better than landing on a private farm. If she gets caught on one of the high voltage nets to keep out intruders, it’s all over.”

It was all I could manage to hunker down enough so as not to be thrown out of the truck as it bounced around.

Hishigami Mai seemed perfectly calm next to me. She hummed while pulling a handgun with a suppressor out from the chest of her yukata.

“Hey, can we really handle this entire witch’s group at once like this?”

“Leave it to me. If I am right, they will almost certainly fall for this trap. They are an annoying force to handle head on, but as long as…you do not…face them…head…on…”

“?”

I frowned as I started having difficulty hearing her.

I then smelled a sweet aroma.

And just as the light truck turned onto the mountain road to pursue the parachute…

I suddenly lost all feeling from my surroundings.

The next thing I knew, I was wrapped in some kind of fog. I looked around while standing. And then something else occurred to me. Why was I standing? I had been hunkered down in the back of the truck to make sure I was not thrown out.

Where was I?

Had I been dragged out of that truck racing along well above the speed limit?

Who had managed that without harming me at all?

“It is a simple magic circle. It is not even worth calling a barrier,” said a female voice. “Now, if you were able to predict I would head toward an even better target if one appeared, why did you not realize *I would change my target again if one even more important than Hyakki Yakou’s leader showed up?*

Eh?

You can’t mean…

“This was all to attack me!?”

I was not given enough time to take action based on the caution welling up in my chest.

Something moved with tremendous speed, ripped apart the thick fog, and *forcefully grabbed my collar.*

Yes. This “something” had a hand and five fingers with which to grab at me.

“Gah…ghhh…!?”

I was lifted up. My legs dangled down in midair. It may have just been the excessive thickness of the fog, but that motion was all it took for the ground to disappear from view below me.

However, the sight that lay before me was so strange that I did not particularly care about being lifted up.

What had grabbed me was a giant tree.

However, it had countless arms stretching out in place of branches, hands blooming in place of flowers, long, narrow legs wriggling along the ground in place of roots, and smooth woman’s skin in place of bark.

Someone was leaning up against the creepy trunk that curved like a woman’s waist.

This person was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman wearing a simple shirt, a miniskirt, and a raincoat despite the weather. The look in her eyes was hidden by the wide brim of her hat. The various individual items could be bought anywhere, but the silhouette they all created together reminded me of an existence I had seen in picture books.

Namely, a witch.

“Horrible, isn’t it? I’m sure you understand the general situation, but unlike European witches, we live in an environment that makes using traditional demons difficult. I had no choice but to take the methods used to turn old gods into evil gods and use them to turn a Japanese Youkai into a demon. That was enough to force some magic out of it.”

“This is…a Youkai…?”

I could feel my face stiffening as I looked at the grotesque tree before me. I had lived in this Intellectual Village for a long time, but I had never seen a monster like this. Nor had I ever heard of one from my grandparents.

But the blonde-haired, blue-eyed witch smoothly said, “Yes. Haven’t you heard of a Furutsubaki?”

“That’s a Japanese camellia tree that has built up great power over the years. They can transform into a girl, but they don’t turn into something this messed up!!”

“No, they don’t. Japanese Packages simply borrow the skills of Youkai, but Western witches *distort the physical body of their object of worship into something else entirely.* We give them a form much easier for a human to use.”

“You’re…kidding…”

“About what? What is needed to efficiently control an existence that exceeds humanity is not flexible negotiation skills or plentiful offerings. *You need to remake their hardware into a form that must do what a human tells it to.*”

An unpleasant feeling ran down my spine.

I had subconsciously decided Packages that assisted in crimes were horrible, but this went well beyond that. This was the same as deciding to give someone 20 eyeballs in order to more efficiently extract tears from them. Just how much suffering and humiliation did one endure while having one’s face and form twisted in order to wring out every last drop of power?

This was the symbol of a culture.

This was overwriting and covering up a paranormal existence.

Was this why witches had been shunned throughout history?

Even as that lifelike arm grabbed at my collar so tightly I had trouble breathing, I forced out a few words.

“Why are you…targeting me…?”

“*I said I prepared this because I had no other choice, remember?* It all comes down to that. I do not care about the economic damage the Australian government is so concerned about. I want to make a contract with a powerful being and borrow its power. I was originally planning to turn an old god into a demon and borrow that, but I found something much more interesting in this Intellectual Village. Something even more interesting than a manual on turning gods into demons or the leader of Hyakki Yakou.”

“You…don’t mean…”

I immediately thought of the secret base in the attic.

This witch was actually after…

“A Succubus. She is a traditional European demon. Compared to a forcibly distorted local god, she is much more certain and holds much less danger of causing any problems with my rituals. Would you choose the genuine item or an emulation? That is what this comes down to.”

“Then why didn’t you directly target our house? As soon as Hishigami Mai left, you could have easily abducted the Succubus!!”

“No, that wouldn’t work. Remember when that Succubus arrived? She used a delivery service, right?”

“How do you know that?”

“I have some of my people in the highest levels of Hyakki Yakou.”

I was not sure that totally explained it, but it was possible Hyakki Yakou really did know everything that had happened.

"The package label functioned as a sort of contract. The package was sent to Jinnai Shinobu, so the Succubus inside became your possession. But you could say that was the same as her taking you hostage. If anyone wants to damage or abduct the Succubus, they must first kill you. She predicted that Hyakki Yakou's leader would be unable to eliminate *the normal person who she owed a debt to thanks to the coup d'etat*, so she used that condition as a shield."

"…"

That goddamn demon!! I'm seriously going to punch her after this is over!!

"Anyway, you are in the way of any new contract with that Succubus, so I need you to die. I will retrieve the Succubus afterwards. And of course, I will slaughter anyone who gets in my way."

Not good.

Not good, not good!!

I had been worried ever since someone like this entered the Intellectual Village, but now she was targeting my house.

But what could I do? That creepy "branch" was still holding me up in the air by my collar. Was there anything a normal high school boy armed with only his wits could hope to do against a witch who Hishigami Mai had said she would be evenly matched against?

Her eyes were covered by the wide brim of her hat, but the witch's lips twisted into a smile.

"Oh, and do not think Hishigami Mai will come to save you. The magic circle isolates this space. I mixed in the oil of the Furutsubaki to pour demonic power into a ceremony that defines the scope of a temple using incense, but it should be enough. At the very least, no one will be able to break in for 12 hours and it has been made so no one will even notice anyway."

"Wait…a second…"

"I didn't really need to go this far to kill a single amateur, but I want to keep this information away from Hishigami Mai until I have secured the Succubus. I am not going to take my time and kill you over 12 hours, so do not worry."

“*That’s not what I meant,*” I muttered. “*If this is really so secure, then who is that behind you?*”

“?”

The witch looked confused and turned around.

And she found…

Part 17 (Succubus)

Now then, time for the true protagonist to make an appearance.

Oh, nice. Not bad getting western black magic to run this well using a Japanese Youkai.

Then again, it's a bit like seeing an American's idea of a ninja boy.

The witch leaning up against the hideous tree frowned when she saw me.

"…How did you get here?"

"Is it really that surprising? Isolating a space using incense sounds good and all, but you basically used the exact same structure as a ceremonial ground for summoning a demon. *None of this does a single thing to keep a demon out.* I didn't even have to try."

"So you know what I am about to do?"

"Let's just say *I came here because I knew.*"

My master, Jinnai Shinobu-chan, then began kicking his legs around and shouting while being held in midair by the Furutsubaki's branch.

"Stop!! Don't worry about me! Apparently she's more powerful than Hishigami Mai!! You came to my house to escape from people like that, right? Then don't try to fight her!!"

Oh?

I had not expected him to try to cover for me. It almost made me feel sorry for binding him with that contract as insurance against Hyakki Yakou.

However…

He seemed to have overlooked the fact that *I had never said I was there to save him.*

"So, Miss Witch. *When do you plan on making this new contract?*"

"Eh…?" said a surprised voice.

It did not belong to the witch; it was my master's.

"As soon as I kill him."

"Then I suggest you do so quickly. You should not underestimate Hyakki Yakou's tracking skills. I do not know what route you plan to use, but you do not want your way back to Australia to be blocked, do you?"

"…You have no attachment to him?"

"This was just a temporary home. Blending into a culture that actually has witches should make things a lot easier. If I have a chance to leave the country, I need to take it. Especially now that Hyakki Yakou and Hishigami Mai have reached this village. That is what I truly think."

My master looked so dumbfounded he may have forgotten he was dangling in midair and having trouble breathing.

As a demon, it was quite an exciting expression to see.

"What…? Eh? Why…?"

"Did you think we were family? Come on now, master. You may know I am Succubus, but you do not actually know my personal name."

"That is an important factor in making contracts, so that is not surprising. A demon will not reveal her name unless she truly trusts someone," added the witch as if to rub salt in the wound.

But…

"Miss Witch, Miss Witch. If you know your history of the witch hunts, you should be fairly suspicious of any wonderful opportunity that practically falls in your lap."

"Your point?"

"I will prove to you that I am telling the truth. *I will kill him myself.*"

"…"

With the sound of a bat being swung, my master was thrown to my feet. He began coughing, but more confusion could be seen in his eyes than suffering.

But that did not change what I had to do.

“How about a riddle, master? Question 1: What is this in my hand?”

“An…ice pick?”

“I am glad your family likes its alcohol so much. I was surprised they drink both eastern and western varieties. Now, Question 2: What will happen if I stab it into your gut?”

“…”

Well, I doubt many people would be able to calmly answer that question.

Luckily, he was able to see the answer firsthand.

I stabbed it right in.

Part 18 (Jinnai Shinobu)

“Cough!? Cough!! Cough cough!! Cough cough cough!?”

“Now then. As there is no saving him, let’s hurry up and make this contract. Do you have everything prepared?”

The ice pick sticking out of my body seemed to cause my brain to numb over more than it did fill me with pain.

The difference between what I thought my body should look like and what I saw before my eyes caused a fundamental error in my thought process.

I’m going to die?

I’m going to die so simply and easily?

“Do not worry about that. More importantly, there is one piece of information I must know first: *Your true name.* To form a contract with you, I must know your personal name. Simply knowing you belong to the Succubus species is not enough.”

“Hm. About that,” said the Succubus with a troubled expression.

She was no longer looking at me. She was acting like I was not even there, like I was no longer human. The way I had been cast aside like a piece of rotting meat told me all too well what my fate would be.

“Unlike in Hollywood movies, demons are not free to be as evil as they wish. I cannot reveal my name in this situation. My contract with my temporary master, Jinnai Shinobu, still remains.”

“Even though you stabbed him in the gut?”

“Yes, even though.” The western European Succubus shrugged. “Making a contract with a demon is like walking across a dangerous tightrope. The slightest opening in your method of using the demon can easily lead to the demon killing you.”

“And that is what happened here?”

“However, if a demon betrays their old master and reveals the information needed to create a new contract despite the old contract still existing, they will simply be breaking the old contract. I have no pretext for acting freely, so I will be unable to remain in this world if I disobey those rules.”

“That boy has been fatally wounded. Can’t we just wait until he dies?”

“The contract between a human and a demon does not end upon the human’s death. After all, the demon is usually trying to obtain the human’s soul after death.”

“Then how can I make the new contract? I need your name to perform the ritual.”

“It is simple.” The Succubus raised her index finger. “I am afraid of breaking my contract by teaching you my name. However, it is often shown in fairy tales that *demons are weakened when a human learns their name against their wishes.*”

“What do you mean?”

“I stabbed Jinnai Shinobu to act as bait. Some Youkai act automatically upon sensing danger to their family. Not that anything can be done now that he has been fatally wounded.”

Some sort of form slowly appeared beyond the extremely thick fog.

It was a glamorous female Zashiki Warashi with long black hair and a red yukata.

She held some small piece of paper in her hand.

It was the summer greeting postcard that had come by airmail.

The witch frowned.

“A demon like you is one thing, but how did this Japanese Youkai enter my magic circle?”

“My name is connected to me. If she travelled along the line connecting it to me, she can travel through this fog.”

The Zashiki Warashi looked different from normal.

I had never seen that good-for-nothing Youkai looking quite so expressionless.

"Where is Shinobu?"

"It is too late."

"Then maybe I should just hold onto this."

"We can just take it. Go ahead, Miss Witch."

With the sound of a whip cracking, one of the Furutsubaki's arm-like branches shot through the air and snatched the postcard from the Zashiki Warashi's hand.

The witch looked down at the white, heavily-decorated writing.

What? But that's…

"Hm. A simple numerical replacement."

"*So have you stolen a look at my name? Then let us get this contract over with. What will you do about the temple for the ceremony?"*

"We can use this. Not the Furutsubaki itself though. It is said a wooden pestle or mallet can transform into a human form. A lot can be done with the oil of the tree."

"Oh? So you didn't just scatter it around as incense to create this ceremonial ground. You also drank it to remake your body."

"What is needed to summon a demon and make a contract is a temple to draw a set flow of power into, a protective circle for the witch, and a summoning circle to call in and fix the target in place."

"What were you going to use for that last one?"

"This."

"A pocket watch?"

"It can also be used as machine oil."

"This does not seem to have anything to do with time. Do its gears create a precise combination of circles that you pass the Youkai's… no, the demon's power through with the oil?" continued the Succubus.

I had no idea how dangerous the amount of blood I had lost was.

"Then let us begin."

"Do we need a written contract?"

"No, with this much preparation, a verbal contract should be enough. And it would be a pain to calculate out all the values while writing it out in the alphabet. More importantly, are you sure you want to make a contract with me?"

"Why would I not?"

"A Succubus may be a traditional demon, but we are not all that powerful."

"If I recklessly tried for something beyond my ability, I would simply destroy myself. You should know that better than anyone."

"I see. Fine, then."

"Then…"

"Yes, let's get started."

My consciousness wavered.

A ringing in my ears exploded in my head every so often like the crashing of waves. I could not hear their voices properly.

"…ng…w……ed………f………ri……b……………s…………… h……………gh……s………e……"

No obvious light or noise exploded out.

No pentagrams or hexagrams appeared.

It simply felt like the situation had begun to roll down a hill. I felt a "flow" that no one would be able to stop once it started. Some sinister power seemed to be pushing us in that direction.

"This is a story from 1403 in a small walled city that relied on trade," said the Succubus suddenly. She was not looking at me. I could not tell if she was trying to speak to me. "My old master was a court scholar who produced high-class horses for royals and nobles. …He had originally been a magician that more broadly worked with living creatures and their souls, but he was required to produce more obvious results in order to earn a living." The Succubus spoke amid the fog, amid the ceremonial ground created by the witch. “My old master specialized in getting animals to breed. One day, the king came to him with a request. He wanted a means of treating infertility. Whether the king left behind an heir or not could directly influence the rise or fall of nations in that time, so it was a major issue.” The Succubus spoke amid that sweet aroma, amid the spell-chanting of that witch who had built a protective magic circle throughout her entire body by taking the oil of that Japanese camellia tree into her own body. “My old master tried every method available to him, but none of those ‘normal’ methods were of any use. He had nowhere left to turn. That was when he learned that an Incubus and a Succubus are actually the same existence and the Incubus attacks women using the sperm taken by the Succubus. He attempted to use that as a means of resolving the king’s troubles. …And he was taken to be executed two weeks later.” The Succubus spoke as that dark ritual continued, as she claimed victory using that pocket watch given the power of the Furutsubaki in the form of machine oil. “Officially, he was blamed for borrowing the power of a demon, but…in reality, it had more to do with certain influential groups that did not want the king to have an heir. And so my old master was burned at the stake. I was unsure what to do, so as an emergency measure, I stored just his soul in my womb to prevent it from deteriorating.”

That was her reason. A simple high school student like me had no way of knowing if it was possible or not. Was it possible because she was a Succubus that ruled over dreams and mating? Or was it possible because of the skills and knowledge of this “old master” she spoke of?

However…

I still did not know what result this “reason” would produce.

That lack of knowledge disturbed me.

She had taken control of the international European agency known as the European Security Force, she had picked a fight with Hyakki Yakou, and now she was trying to make a comeback in Australia. To go that far, the Succubus had to have some sort of powerful vision for the future within her.

And one step of her plan was about to come to an end.

The contract between demon and witch was about to be completed.

“For the above reasons, the veil of great ignorance shall occasionally prove that the door of unknown possibilities stands open. By intentionally twisting the structure of a former goddess of fertility and the shrine maidens that followed her, I shall connect a twisted power to myself. The witch Marguerite Steinhols and the demon Tselika Wien Alpha Chelydia Lumidrier now enter into an honest connection that crosses this honest world."

The instant she stood on that new stage, the Succubus narrowed her eyes with deep emotion.

She then muttered a few words to me where I lay collapsed on the ground.

"Well, it may be hopeless for a demon to hope to be right…but was this perhaps wrong of me?"

"…How should I know?" I spat back, but I was not sure if I actually managed to get the words out.

Dammit.

Normally after being betrayed and surprised like this, more resentful words would well up within me, but surprisingly, nothing came.

"That isn't something you should ask me," I said. "But if you felt any hesitation toward accepting this, maybe you should try a different method next time."

I did not know how she had interpreted my words, but it seemed the Succubus smiled slightly.

And then…

The upper body of the witch who had given the name Marguerite Steinhols suddenly lurched forward.

"Gh…gh…?"

With her body doubled over, the witch brought her right hand to her mouth. A dark red liquid spilled from between her fingers.

"Wh-what? The ritual did not fail. I completed the contract with the demon. So what went wrong…!?"

"Hm, I wonder what it could have been?" said the Succubus.

The witch looked over at her and then her body froze in place. A smile filled with much more obvious evil than before could now be seen on the Succubus's face.

It was as if she was looking at some prey she had caught in a trap.

"The ice pick… That's it! The ice pick! Unlike a normal blade, the wound is small. You could easily stab it into him without hitting any organs or arteries!! That means you-…!!"

"Of course. I am my master's pawn. Really, you should have noticed something was up when I left the ice pick inside him. *I did that to make sure he did not bleed too much.*"

"So you decided to stay with your temporary household. Ghbh!? But the contract was a success. Did you forget that I can now order you to finish off Jinnai Shinobu!?"

The witch swung her right hand and completed a complex and detailed motion with her fingers.

However…

"Nothing…happened?"

"Looks that way."

"It can't be… Was there some defect in the ritual? No, the ritual itself succeeded. I can feel I have entered into a contract with a demon!! *So why do I have no connection with you!? What demon am I connected to!?*"

"As you know, you need a demon's true name to enter into a contract with it." The Succubus clapped her hands together in front of her face and tilted her head. She continued speaking with that mocking gesture and a mocking smile. "*But do you have any way to check if that is actually my name?*"

"What…?"

Marguerite looked down at the postcard in her hand.

She was double checking the string of numbers on it representing a name.

But…

“Unlike the side with the picture, the side of the summer greeting postcard with the writing is heavily decorated, right?” The Zashiki Warashi finally spoke up to answer this simple question. “I covered it with quick-drying glue and sprayed flour on it. I then rewrote the original text but with the sender and receiver fields *reversed*. Surely you are smart enough to understand what that means.”

"You were tricked into thinking another demon's name was mine. That is what happened. The real question is whether a witch who thought a Succubus would be a nice, safe option will be able to control a great demon that *just barely did not rank on the level of a demon that symbolizes one of the seven deadly sins*."

"Ahh!! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

She let out a tremendous cry.

And then a rumbling noise drowned out even that cry.

I doubted it was just due to my hazy mind that I did not know what was happening. I focused my entire mind on averting my gaze from something I must not see. I could instinctually tell this was something I was not meant to see. I was so weak I did not want anyone or anything to view me as an enemy, so the great intimidating atmosphere that ruled the entire area for a short while almost seemed a blessing.

Something had failed.

And as a result, something had happened to the witch.

Finally, I suddenly realized I was lying face up on the midsummer mountain road. The fog was gone. The witch who had produced the fog was also gone. Everything was back to normal. Everything except for an old Japanese camellia tree growing unnaturally above the asphalt.

The Zashiki Warashi and Succubus stood nearby.

Those members of the occult had easily deceived that witch who had fully used the intellect that was a human's greatest weapon.

While leaning up against the Japanese camellia tree, the Succubus smiled and said, "She is not dead. Demons wish to make human souls their personal possessions, so we make sure not to destroy those souls. Of course, she will probably be begging for her life after spending 5 minutes in the same place as that monster."

"…Why?"

"Are you asking why I saved you?" said that demon so readily so as to not let me imagine just what was whirling around within her heart. “That is what I asked about before. With my goal so close at hand, was it wrong of me to do this?”

Part 19 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

The parachute fell and a kimono-wearing girl of about 10 was caught in the tree branches. We brought her into the back of the light truck and fled as quickly as we could. However, the SAS-style special forces Mai had mentioned never came. I had no idea what was happening.

And…

At some point, Shinobu had disappeared from the back of the truck. I was extremely worried about him, but Mai just kept saying I would know where he was soon enough.

It seemed she had used him in one of those traps or conspiracies she loved so much, but that only made me more worried.

Currently, Mai was talking with someone over her satellite phone.

“Yes, yes. Oh, so it worked? Right, right. So you haven’t killed them. Then get the names of the rest of the witch’s group from them. Once we have that list, we will overlook you as promised. Your wanted status within Hyakki Yakou will be removed.”

I glanced into the rearview mirror and asked, “Who are you talking with?”

“You don’t want to know,” said the mystery freak from the passenger seat.

After hanging up, Mai began speaking with the girl of about 10.

“What about the special forces acting on the witch’s behalf?”

“Hyakki Yakou controls the sky here. We have eight Generation 4.5 and Generation 5 fighters. They are multirole fighters, so they can easily attack ground targets. I doubt even a pro can stand up to them with only rifles and shoulder-fired missiles. They should quickly retreat across the mountain.”

“We should have the witch’s list before long. We can use that to at least handle anyone within Japan.”

“The ones that have taken root in Australia will be harder to eliminate, but we will apply as much pressure as we can.”

“This has worn down Hyakki Yakou’s 100 officers once more. Why don’t you use that to force it through?”

“Conflicts between organizations are not that simple. But I suppose all we need to do is prepare a situation in which the Australian government will abandon the witch’s group.”

“Do you have any ideas how to do that?”

“Australia’s large scale circular farms are having problems with cyclones and insect outbreaks, so what if we help them properly pacify this god? Instead of trying to turn a god into a demon, we can help them honor and revere the god.”

“I see. Once they have another way, the government will lose any reason to cover for the witch.”

“An excessive supply lowers the value of things. We call this the North Wind and the Sun method.”

This girl who was talking about things just as dangerous as Hishigami Mai was frightening me to the point of feeling chilled, but who was she?

“Don’t worry about it,” said Hishigami Mai when she saw me glancing nervously in their direction. “This is all over. Once we return to that thatch-roof house, everyone can go back to their peaceful everyday lives.”

Part 20 (Jinnai Shinobu)

If only it really could have ended there.

Unfortunately, the world was not that kind.

I had vodka splashed on my stomach and a huge piece of gauze wrapped around it. After receiving that love-filled Succubus-style first aid, I somehow made it back home.

The Nekomata immediately said, “Your father wishes to speak with you. I think he wants to lecture you.”

“Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

While I was receiving that lecture (that included a fist or two), it seemed the situation continued to develop. My uncle, the twintailed girl, Hishigami Mai, and the kimono-wearing girl had used a large transport helicopter prepared by Hyakki Yakou to quickly leave Noukotsu Village.

“They said a helicopter is the most relaxing.”

“S-so what? I don’t see how that could be true.”

Also, that kimono-wearing girl and Hishigami Mai were one thing, but why had my uncle left on the helicopter prepared by Hyakki Yakou? I guessed he must have been very busy with his work.

That evening, I chased around the Succubus a bit after she said going to the hospital would do nothing to help. I then had that Okinawa-born thing call out to me from the yard.

“I am Shisa.”

“Hm? What happened to your friend? That Kijimuna thing.”

“He is fighting with the Furutsubaki over his place in the yard. I was surprised when a second Furutsubaki suddenly appeared.”

Well, it would have been a nuisance if it had stayed on that asphalt mountain road.

I followed the Shisa’s gaze and expected to find some trees moving around violently, but instead found three small kimono-wearing children fighting. It seemed to be a traditional competition to see whose Youkai transformation ability was the best.

“I had the Yuki Onna make it snow and made a snowman and igloo. I have no regrets. If I do not return soon, my family may grow worried.”

“I see. They aren’t going to think the decoration on their house’s roof was stolen, are they?”

The Shisa ignored my worries and called out to the Kijimuna still fighting in the yard. The Youkai ran over to the Shisa while still in the form of a small child.

The Shisa said, “Goodbye. Visit us if you are ever in Okinawa.”

I watched the Shisa and Kijimuna walk away. With the sunset behind them, it was a somehow lonely scene.

The Succubus (now wearing a T-shirt) called out from behind me.

“Having somewhere to return to sure is nice.”

“You may be trying to make it sound nostalgic, but I don’t want to let something as dangerous as you back into the European Security Force.”

“Heh heh heh. I will take that to mean you want me all to yourself.”

We chatted as we returned to the Japanese-style living room.

“Are you really okay with this?” I asked.

“With what?”

“Well…I’m glad you saved me, but didn’t you want a large country filled with plenty of witches where you could do whatever you wanted?”

“Given their situation, it was not a very attractive invitation.”

“Come to think of it, I understand how the witch’s group knew you were here due to having people inside Hyakki Yakou, but how did you know what was going on in Australia? You’ve been in the attic the whole time.”

“Oh, that. I am the demon that controlled the European Security Force. I constructed a defensive network for any potential enemies from various areas of the world: North America, South America, the Far East, Eastern Europe, etc. In the process, I had them investigate Australia because it holds the most influence in Oceania. …Anyway, due to various circumstances, Europe and North America have no reason to want the occult techniques of Japan, so I figured it was probably Australia this time.”

“Hm. So why was it not an attractive invitation?”

“They had taken on various burdens to make up for how far they had fallen behind.” The Succubus waved her arrow-shaped tail back and forth. “For example, this witch used a Furutsubaki she had turned into a demon. But where did she get the Youkai?”

“Eh? Once she arrived in Japan, I would assume.”

“She would not have made it in time. Remaking a paranormal existence may sound simple enough, but even at the quickest, it takes three years. If she had been hiding in Japan that long, Hyakki Yakou would have noticed.”

“But Japanese Youkai can only be found in Japan.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” The Succubus grinned. “Have you heard of the International Plantation Project that uses circular farms and plant factories in Australia’s deserts? It’s famous enough to even be used on quiz shows.”

“I saw it on that rerun you and the Yuki Onna were watching. What about it?”

“Each individual farm has a special environment prepared for it so that it can produce the special crops of another country, but that is just a front. Preparing a special environment sounds innocent enough, but what if that ‘environment’ included aspects of the occult?”

“You don’t mean…”

“Just think of them as the occult version of Chinatown or Little Tokyo. The Furutsubaki was likely forcibly brought over from Japan to be replanted and then grown on one of those farms in the desert. They make a farm for each Youkai or fairy and regulate the environment specifically for them. …Although, this occasionally causes some bugs and they transform into some strange UMA or crop circle." The Succubus gave a simple smile. "It seems Hyakki Yakou mistakenly viewed the natural disasters as the anger of the land's god, but that is not what is happening. Gathering *convenient parts of the occult* such as fairies, Youkai, and spirits from around the world and preparing a spiritual foundation for them has created conflicts and repeated accidental activations that have ultimately led to the natural disasters."

This was not the same as a carefully-regulated Intellectual Village. That was artificial land that Youkai would find uncomfortable. When I imagined those circular farms spread out across the desert, it gave me a horribly cramped impression.

"That country's government wanted the blessings of sacred land, but their techniques could not keep up with their desires. This was like something unpleasant beginning to live in a church or temple that had fallen into disarray due to lack of maintenance."

An inescapable prison.

A demon that could not leave the magic circle that summoned it.

That was what the idea made me think of.

"For a demon like me, it may have been like inviting me into a birdcage. I would have a decent living environment and plenty of food, but nothing else. Now do you see why it did not sound like much fun? With that little freedom, *I doubt I would have a chance to achieve my goal.* …But with such a heavy blow to their grains market and the failure of the witch's project, their government will likely run crying to Hyakki Yakou to quickly fix it all for them."

"…"

Her goal.

Had what the Succubus said after stabbing me with the ice pick been true? Or had that been nothing more than another act to ensure the witch named Marguerite Steinhols let down her guard?

Also…

If she was going to deceive that witch, couldn't it have been after killing me? For example, she could have pretended to go to Australia but disappeared after leaving Japan. After escaping

Hyakki Yakou, she could have created a new kingdom like the European Security Force.

“Do you find it strange?”

“…Um.”

As a demon, she may have been good at noticing negative emotions because the Succubus seemed to have read my doubts from my expression alone.

She then said, “My old master spoke a few words just before he was burned at the stake. I am merely obeying them.”

“What did he say?”

“I will keep that a secret. It is not often you find something more important than a contract.” The Succubus grinned. “Well, I just wanted to lay the trap at the time, but it would have left a bad taste in my mouth if I killed you after those words.”

At that point, the glamorous Zashiki Warashi entered the room. She must have been playing video games in my room because she still had the 3D goggles on.

“Everything has smelled very Western today.”

“Oh, is that so? Well, whether Japanese, Chinese, or Western, it can kill me just the same.”

“I was talking about dinner. Something seemed off, so I peeked into the kitchen. As usual, your mother has been stirring a pot for hours creating some kind of sauce.”

“Not good!! That isn’t Western; it’s a new invention! And her inventions have never turned out well!!”

“…Yes. And I think she has started to suspect she has left the path leading to a success. But she seems to be desperately hoping she can fix it by adding more seasonings. I am going to force my way past this even if I have to insist that I will simply make myself a sandwich for dinner.”

“Simply? I can’t even imagine you making a sandwich, you good-for-nothing Youkai. And from what you’ve said, she has grown desperate to not waste all the effort she’s put into this. I doubt she’ll listen to what we say when she gets this stubborn."

"In a case like this, it is more effective to place out the proper ingredients without the target noticing and wait for the target to notice on her own. Now then, leave this to the demon who specializes in temptation."

And so a human, a Youkai, and a demon began putting together a strategy to avoid that night's crisis.

It may have seemed a complete waste, but we did not see it that way. No matter who it was putting their heads together, an "incident" of this level was just perfect.

In fact…

Those gigantic incidents we had been dealing with before were what did not belong.

Notes

1. ↑ Noukotsu refers to the process of placing someone’s cremated remains into a funerary urn.
2. ↑ In Japan, putting out filled plastic water bottles is thought to keep stray cats away.

Afterword

And so here is the 2nd volume.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This work can now officially be called a series. The original concept was to tell the stories of Youkai in the fictional living environments known as Intellectual Villages, but compared to Volume 1 and all its Intellectual Villages, this volume's stories were set outside that basic structure a lot more. Chapter 3 and the second half of Chapter 4 would be the most obvious examples.

I also used Uchimaku Hayabusa a lot more this time. At first glance, he seems to be a guy with common sense stuck at a midpoint where he is not allowed the inexperience of Jinnai Shinobu and cannot resolve anything and everything as smartly as Hishigami Mai. However, he does live quite a crazy life too. The idea of "Hishigami Mai's world" showed up a few times, but "Uchimaku Hayabusa's world" is enough to rival it. Uchimaku Hayabusa took half a step into "Hishigami Mai's world" this time, but you also got to enjoy seeing him run around his home turf of the big city.

The detective is only interested in the living while the mystery freak is only interested in the dead. This time, I told the story of the detective being isolated from his organization, but I think there is a lot more I can do with that duo. Creating some conflict between the two could make for some interesting drama.

I paid careful attention to once more show the difference between humans and Youkai. I also explained some of the reason behind the Zashiki Warashi teasing Jinnai Shinobu. She has no problem showing off her skin because she fully views herself as his guardian. …That said, it is possible he could shoot Cupid's arrow right through her heart by calling her "onee-chan". However, Jinnai Shinobu is in his rebellious teenage years, so he would rather bite his own tongue than do that.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editor Miki-san. This novel had a lot of Youkai without human forms and it focused a lot on some annoying creature-y kind of stuff. I am truly thankful they stuck with my selfish requests.

And I give my thanks to the readers. By cherry-picking the species used, I could easily make all the Youkai look like girls, but I have chosen not to do that. This is another selfish choice of mine, so thank you for sticking with me regardless.

And I will end this here.

I will just hope I can write a third volume.

I got careless and the number of pages really got out of hand…

-Kamachi Kazuma

Backward to Volume 1 Forward to Volume 3